

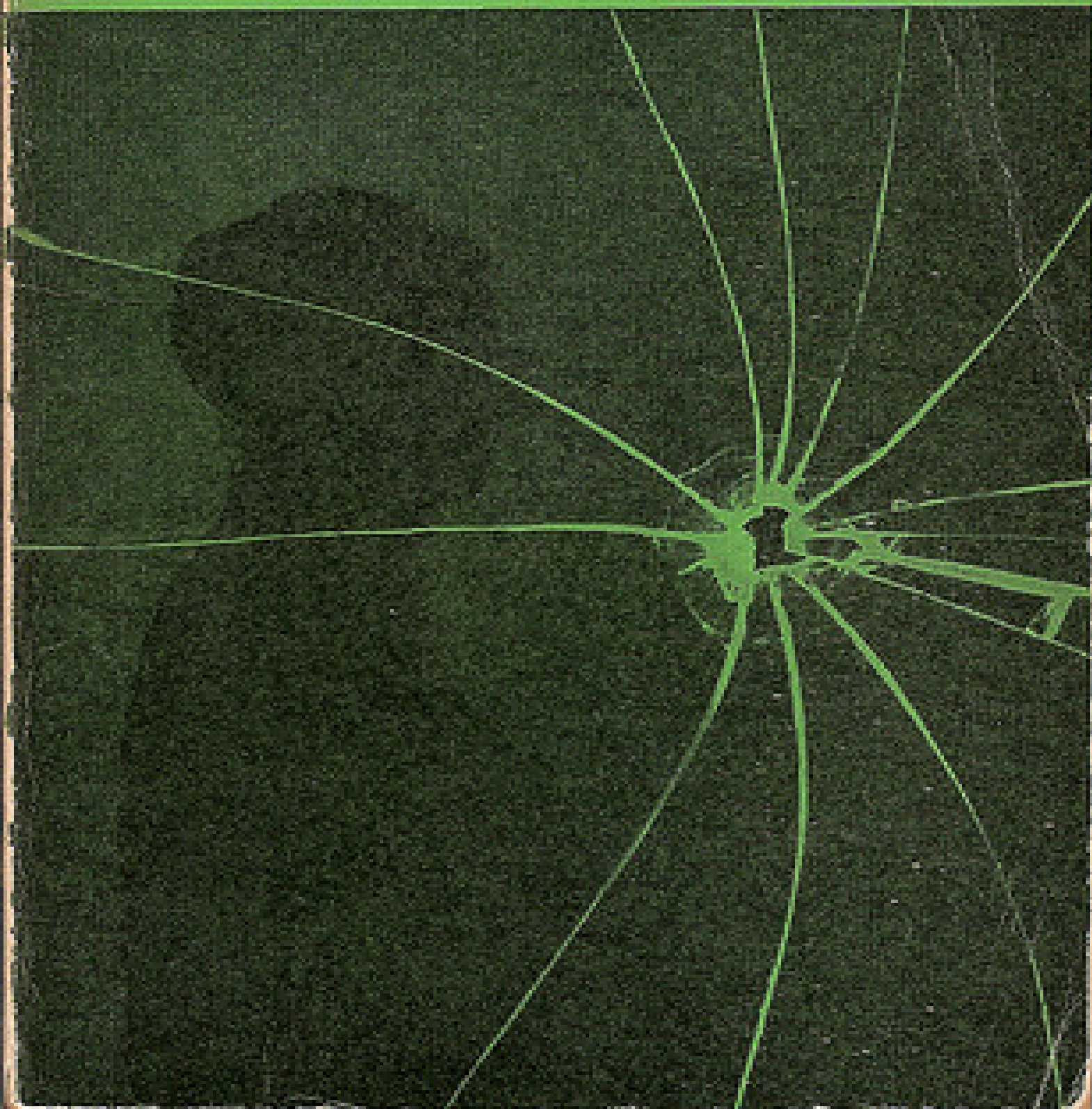


Penguin Crime

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Maigret and the old lady

Simenon



Maigret And The Old Lady

MAIGRET ET LA VIEILLE DAME

THE 60TH EPISODE IN THE MAIGRET SAGA

1949

Georges Simenon

Translated from the French by Robert Brain



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Georges Simenon

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NEW YORK

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MAIGRET AND THE OLD LADY

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- -

He left the Paris-Le Havre train at a small, depressing station, Bréauté-Beuzeville. He had had to get up at five o'clock that morning, and failing to find a taxi, had to take the first métro to the Gare Saint-Lazare. Now, he was waiting for his connection.

“The train for Étretat, please?”

It was after eight o'clock and it had been daylight for some time; but here, because of the slight drizzle and the damp chill in the air, it seemed like dawn.

There was no restaurant at the station, nor a refreshment bar, only a sort of tavern on the opposite side of the road, where some cattle dealers' carts were standing.

“Étretat? You've got plenty of time. That's your train over there.”

A good way from the platform, some carriages without an engine were pointed out to him, carriages of an earlier model, painted an out-of-date green, with a few motionless passengers behind the windows, who seemed as if they had been waiting since the day before. It didn't look real. It was like a toy, a child's drawing.

A family—obviously Parisians!—came running up out of breath, Heaven knows why, jumped across the rails and rushed towards the engineless train, the three children carrying shrimping-nets.

This was the effective click. For a moment Maigret was young again, although he was still at least twenty kilometres from the sea, its smell seemed to reach him and he thought he could hear its rhythmic beating; he raised his head and looked with some respect at the grey clouds which must have been coming from the open sea.

For him who had been born and spent his childhood far inland, the sea had always been like that: shrimping-nets, a toy train, men in flannels, beach umbrellas, shopkeepers selling shells and souvenirs, bars where you could eat oysters and drink white wine, and boarding-houses where Madame Maigret became so unhappy after a few days of doing nothing with her hands, that she would gladly have suggested helping with the washing-up.

Of course he knew this was not true, but each time he came near the sea he could not help getting the impression of an artificial carefree world, where nothing serious could happen.

During his career he had investigated several cases along the coast and had come across some real dramas there. But now, once more, as he sipped a calvados at the bar of the tavern, he was tempted to smile at the old lady called Valentine and her step-son, Monsieur Besson.

It was September, Wednesday the 6th of September, and this was yet another year in which he had not had time for a holiday. About eleven o'clock the day before, the old porter had come into his office, at the Quai des Orfèvres, and had handed him a visiting-card edged in black.

Mme. VEUVE FERDINAND BESSON

La Bicoque

Étretat

“Does she want to see me personally?”

“She insists on seeing you, if only for a moment. She says she has come specially from Étretat.”

“What does she look like?”

“She’s an old lady, a charming old lady.”

He showed her in, and indeed she was the most charming old lady imaginable, small and slender, with a delicate, fresh-tinted face beneath her pure white hair, so alive and gracious that she seemed more like an actress playing the part of an old marquise than a real old lady.

“You probably do not know me, chief-inspector, and I appreciate all the more the favour you do me in seeing me, because I know you from having followed your exciting cases all these years. If you come to my home, as I hope you will, I shall even be able to show you lots of newspaper cuttings about yourself.”

“Thank you very much.”

“I am Valentine Besson, a name which probably means nothing to you, but you will know who I am when I add that my husband, Ferdinand Besson, was the founder of Juva Products.”

Maigret was old enough to be familiar with the name ‘Juva’. When he was quite young he had seen it in the advertising pages of newspapers and on the street hoardings, and he seemed to remember that his mother used Juva Cream when she prepared for an evening out.

The old lady in front of him was dressed with an exquisite, rather old-fashioned elegance, with a profusion of jewellery.

“Since the death of my husband, five years ago, I have lived alone in a small house I own at Étretat. To be more exact, until last Sunday I was living there alone but for a maid, a local girl who had been in my service for several years. She died during Sunday night, Inspector; in a way, she died instead of me, and that is why I have come to beg your help.”

She had not spoken dramatically. With a little smile, she seemed to be apologizing for mentioning such tragic things.

“Don’t be alarmed, I’m not mad. I’m not even what they call a dotty old woman. When I say that Rose—that’s my maid’s name—died in my place, I’m almost certain I’m not mistaken. May I, very briefly, tell you the story?”

“Please do.”

“Every evening, for at least twenty years, I’ve been in the habit of taking something to make me sleep, since I suffer from insomnia. It’s a sleeping-draught in liquid form, rather bitter, but the bitterness is counterbalanced by a strong taste of

aniseed. I know what I'm talking about, because my husband was a chemist.

"On Sunday, as on any other evening, I prepared my glass of medicine before going to bed, and Rose brought it to my room when I was in bed and ready to take it.

"I took one sip and found it tasted more bitter than usual.

" 'I must have put in more than twelve drops, Rose. I shan't drink any more.'

" 'Good-night, Madame!'

"She took the glass away as usual. Did she taste it out of curiosity? Did she swallow it all? It seems quite likely, because the glass was found empty in her room.

"During the night, at about two o'clock in the morning, I was awakened by the sounds of groans, for the house is not a large one. I got up from my bed and found my daughter also up."

"I thought you lived alone with your maid."

"Sunday was my birthday, the 3rd of September, and my daughter had come from Paris to see me and had stayed the night.

"I don't want to waste your time, Inspector. We found La Rose dying in her bed. My daughter ran to fetch Dr. Jolly, and by the time he arrived, Rose had died with the characteristic convulsions.

"The doctor had no hesitation in stating that she died from arsenical poisoning.

"As she was not the sort of girl to commit suicide, and as she ate exactly the same things as we did, it is practically certain that the poison was in the medicine intended for me."

"Do you suspect somebody of having attempted to murder you?"

"How could I suspect anybody? Dr. Jolly, who is an old friend of mine and used to look after my husband, telephoned

the police at Le Havre, and an inspector came on Monday morning.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Inspector Castaing. Dark-haired with a red face.”

“I know. What does he say?”

“He doesn’t say anything. He is questioning the people in the district. They took the body to Le Havre for the autopsy.”

The ringing of the telephone interrupted her. Maigret answered it. It was the Chief of Police Headquarters.

“Can you come and speak to me in my office for a moment, Maigret?”

“At once?”

“If possible.”

He asked the old lady to excuse him. His chief was waiting for him.

“Would a few days by the sea tempt you at all?”

Why did Maigret then say, at a venture :

“At Étretat?”

“You know about it then?”

“I don’t know. Go on.”

“I’ve just had a ’phone call from the Minister’s office. Do you know Charles Besson?”

“In Juva Creams too?”

“Not exactly. He’s the son. Charles Besson lives at Fécamp and was elected Deputy for the Seine-Inférieure two years ago.”

“And his mother lives at Étretat.”

“Not his mother, but his step-mother, since she’s his father’s second wife. You must realize that I’ve only just learnt by telephone what I’m about to tell you. Charles Besson has approached the Minister to see if you would take up a case at Étretat, although it’s not in your province.”

“His step-mother’s maid was poisoned on Sunday night.”

“Do you read the Normandy papers?”

“No. The old lady’s in my office.”

“Also wanting you to go to Étretat?”

“Exactly. She’s made the journey specially, which makes one think she’s unaware of her son’s action.”

“What have you decided?”

“That’s up to you, chief.”

This was why, a little after half-past eight on Wednesday morning, at Bréauté-Beuzeville, Maigret was at last climbing into a little train which he found difficult to take seriously, and was leaning out of the window to catch a glimpse of the sea as soon as possible.

As they approached it, the sky became brighter, and when they came out from between the hills covered with pastures, it was a pale blue with just a few light, fresh clouds.

Maigret had telephoned the Le Havre Flying Squad the day before, to advise Inspector Castaing of his arrival, but he looked in vain for him now. Women in summer dresses and half-naked children, who were waiting for somebody, gave the platform a cheerful aspect. The Stationmaster, who seemed to be inspecting the passengers in some uncertainty, came up to the chief-inspector:

“You wouldn’t happen to be Monsieur Maigret?”

“As it happens, I am.”

“In that case I have a message for you.”

He handed him an envelope. Castaing had written to him:

“Excuse me for not being there to meet you. I’m at Yport for the funeral. I suggest you go to the Hôtel des Anglais, where I hope to return for lunch. I shall put you in the picture then.”

It was only ten o’clock, and Maigret, who had brought just one light bag, set off on foot towards the hotel, not far from

the beach.

But before going in, and in spite of his suitcase, he went to have a look at the sea and the white cliffs on either side of the shingle beach; there were a few young people, girls dancing in the waves and others playing tennis behind the hotel; there were mothers of families sitting knitting in deck-chairs, and old couples walking slowly along the beach.

For years, while he was at school, he had watched his friends return sun-tanned from their holidays, full of stories to tell and with shells in their pockets, whereas he was earning his living for a long time before it was his turn to see the sea.

It made him a little sad to notice that he no longer got a little shock, that he could look indifferently at the dazzling foam of the waves and at the life-saver with his bare, tattooed arms, sitting in his dinghy, which occasionally disappeared behind a large wave.

He knew the smell in the hotel so well that he suddenly missed Madame Maigret, as it had always been in her company that he had sniffed that smell.

“Are you intending to stay long?” he was asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I only mention it, because we close on the 15th of September and it’s already the 6th.”

Everything would be closed, like a theatre; the souvenir shops, the pastry shops; shutters would be up everywhere, and the deserted beach would be given over to the sea and the sea-gulls.

“Do you know Madame Besson?”

“Valentine? Of course I know her. She comes from here. She was born here, her father was a fisherman. I didn’t know her as a child, because I’m younger than her, but I remember her when she worked for the Seuret sisters, who kept a pastry shop then. One of the two sisters is dead. The other is still alive. She’s ninety-two. You will see her house, not far from Valentine’s, the one with a blue fence round the garden. May I ask you please to fill in your registration form?”

The manager—perhaps he was the proprietor?—read it and looked at Maigret with greater interest.

“Are you the Maigret from the police? And have you come specially from Paris for this business?”

“Inspector Castaing is staying here, isn’t he?”

“Well, he’s been having most of his meals here since Monday, but he goes back to Le Havre every evening.”

“I’m expecting him.”

“He’s at the funeral, at Yport.”

“I know.”

“Do you think somebody really tried to poison Valentine?”

“I haven’t had time to form an opinion.”

“If anybody did it, it can only have been one of the family.”

“Do you mean her daughter?”

“I don’t mean anybody in particular. I know nothing about it. There were a lot of them, at La Bicoque, last Sunday. And I can’t see anybody in this district having anything against Valentine. You can’t be expected to know the good that woman did when she still had the means, during her husband’s lifetime. She still does a lot, and although she’s far from being rich, she thinks only of giving. It’s a nasty business, believe me; Étretat has always been a quiet place. It’s our policy to encourage a select class of visitors, mainly families, preferably from a certain social level. I could give you some examples...”

Maigret preferred to go for a walk in the sunny streets, and in the Place de la Mairie he read above a white shop-front: Pâtisserie Maurin—formerly Maison Seuret’.

He asked a van-driver where he could find La Bicoque, and he was shown a road which wound up a gentle slope on the side of the hill, bordered by a few villas surrounded by gardens. He stopped a certain distance from a house tucked away in the trees, where he could see a thread of smoke winding slowly up from the chimney against the pale blue of the sky, and when he returned to the hotel, Inspector Castaing

had arrived; his little black Simca was parked in front of the door, and he himself was waiting at the head of the steps.

“You had a good journey, Chief-Inspector? I’m terribly sorry I couldn’t be at the station. I thought it would be interesting to attend the funeral: If what I’ve heard is true, that’s also your method.”

“How did it go off?”

They began walking along beside the sea.

“I don’t know. I’m tempted to answer: rather badly. There was a heaviness in the air. The girl’s body was brought from Le Havre this morning, and her family was waiting at the station with a van to take them to Yport. It’s the Trochu family. You’ll be hearing about them. There are a lot of Trochus around here, nearly all fishermen. The father was in the herring fleet at Fécamp for a long time, and his two eldest sons are in it now. Rose was the eldest of the daughters. There are two or three others, one of whom works in a café at Le Havre.”

Castaing had a thick shock of hair, a low forehead, and he followed an idea as fiercely as he might have driven a plough.

“I’ve been at Le Havre six years now, working over the district. In the villages, mainly those around the châteaux, you still find respectful, humble people who speak of ‘the master’. There are another sort who put on a tougher air, suspicious, sometimes cantankerous folk. I don’t yet know in which lot I would class the Trochus but this morning the atmosphere around Valentine Besson was pretty cold, almost threatening.”

“I’ve just been told that they adore her at Étretat.”

“Yport is not Étretat. And *La Rose*, as she is called here, is dead.”

“The old lady was at the funeral?”

“In the front row. Some people call her the châtelaine, perhaps because she once owned a château in the Orne, or in Sologne, I forget now. Have you met her?”

“She came to see me in Paris.”

“She told me she was going to Paris, but I didn’t know it was to see you. What do you think of her?”

“Nothing yet.”

“She was once colossally rich. For some years she had her private house in the Avenue d’Iéna, her château, her yacht, and La Bicoque was only a pied-à-terre.

“She used to come here in a big chauffeur-driven limousine, and another car followed with the luggage. She would create a sensation on Sundays, when she attended mass in the front row (she always had her own pew in church), and she gave away money by the handful. If someone was in difficult circumstances, people used to say:

“ ‘Just go and see Valentine.’ ”

“Many of them, you see, particularly amongst the older ones, still call her by that name.

“This morning she arrived at Yport by taxi, just as she used to descend from her car in the old days, and it was she who seemed to be the chief mourner. She brought a huge wreath, which put the others to shame.

“Perhaps I’m mistaken, but I had the impression that the Trochus were annoyed and were looking crossly at her. She was determined to shake hands with everyone, and the father only did so with a bad grace, not looking at her. One of the sons, Henri, the eldest, firmly turned his back on her.”

“Did Madame Besson’s daughter accompany her?”

“She returned to Paris on Monday by the afternoon train. I had no authority to keep her. You must already have realized that I’m still at sea. However, I think it will be necessary to question her once more.”

“What’s she like?”

“Just as her mother must have been at her age, that’s to say when she was thirty-eight. She only looks twenty-five. She’s small and slim, very pretty, with enormous eyes which almost always have a childlike expression. That didn’t stop a man,

who wasn't her husband, from sleeping in her room last Sunday night at La Bicoque."

"Did she tell you that?"

"I found it out, but too late to ask her the full facts. I'll have to tell you all this in detail. The case is much more complicated than it seems, and I've been obliged to take notes. May I?"

He drew from his pocket a smart notebook bound in red leather, which hardly had anything in common with the laundry book Maigret normally used.

"We were notified at Le Havre at seven o'clock on Monday morning, and I found a message on my desk when I arrived at eight. I took the Simca and was here a little after nine. Charles Besson was getting out of his car just ahead of me."

"Does he live at Fécamp?"

"His house is there and his family live there all the year, but since he's been elected Deputy, he spends part of the time in Paris, where he has a flat in a house in the Boulevard Raspail. He spent all day Sunday here with his family, that's to say his wife and four children."

"He's not Valentine's son, is he?"

"Valentine hasn't got a son, only a daughter, Arlette, the one I've been telling you about, who's married to a dentist in Paris."

"Was the dentist here on Sunday, too?"

"No. Arlette came by herself. It was her mother's birthday. It seems to be a family tradition to visit her on that day. When I asked her which train she had come on, she said the morning one, the same that you took.

"You'll see that it's not true. The first thing I did on Monday, as soon as the body had been taken to Le Havre, was to examine all the rooms in the house. It wasn't an easy job, because, although it's small and trim, it's full of odd corners, fragile furniture and ornaments.

“Apart from Valentine’s room and the maid’s room, both of them on the first floor, there is only one spare bedroom, on the ground floor, which Arlette occupied. When I shifted the bedside table, I came across a man’s handkerchief, and I got the impression that the young woman, who saw me find it, was at once very upset. She grabbed it quickly from my hand.

“ ‘That’s another of my husband’s handkerchiefs I’ve taken.’

“I don’t know why, but it wasn’t until that evening that I remembered the embroidered initial on it, an H. Arlette had just left. I had given her a lift to the station in my car, and had watched her buy her ticket at the booking-office.

“It’s stupid, I know. Just as I was getting back into my car, it struck me that she had not come with a return ticket. I went back into the main hall of the station. I questioned the man at the barrier.

“ ‘That lady arrived on Sunday on the 10 a.m. train, didn’t she?’

“ ‘Which lady?’

“ ‘The one I just saw off.’

“ ‘Madame Arlette? No, sir.’

“ ‘She didn’t come down on Sunday?’

“ ‘She may have come on Sunday, but not by train. I was collecting the tickets, I should have recognized her.’ ”

Castaing looked at Maigret with some uncertainty.

“Are you listening?”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“Perhaps you think these details are a waste of time?”

“Of course not. I must get used to it.”

“To what?”

“To everything, the station, Valentine, Arlette, the ticket collector, the Trochus. Yesterday I knew nothing about all this.”

“When I returned to La Bicoque, I asked the old lady her son-in-law’s name. He’s called Julien Sudre, and neither name begins with an H. Her two step-sons are called Théo and Charles Besson. There’s only the gardener, who works for her three days a week, who’s called Honoré; but in the first place, he wasn’t there on Sunday, and secondly, I found out that he only uses big red floral handkerchiefs.

“Not knowing which was the best way to tackle the case, I began to question the people in the town, and that’s how I learnt, thanks to the newsagent, that Arlette, instead of coming by train, had arrived by road, in a green sports car.

“That bit was easy. The owner of the green car booked a room for Sunday night at the hotel where I’ve suggested you should stay.

“He’s called Hervé Peyrot, his registration form says that he’s a wine merchant and lives in Paris on the Quai des Grands-Augustins.”

“Did he sleep out?”

“He stayed in the hotel bar until it closed, shortly before midnight, and then, instead of going up to bed, he left the hotel on foot, saying he was going to have a look at the sea. According to the night-porter he didn’t return until about half-past two in the morning. I questioned the valet who cleans the shoes and he told me that the soles of Peyrot’s shoes were stained with red soil.

“Tuesday morning I went back to La Bicoque, and beneath the window of the room occupied by Arlette, I discovered some footprints in a flower-bed.

“What do you make of that?”

“Nothing.”

“To go on to Théo Besson...”

“Was he there too?”

“Not during the night. You realize, don’t you, that the two Besson sons are the children of an earlier marriage and that

Valentine is not their mother? I've noted down the whole family tree, and if you like..."

"Not now, I'm hungry."

"Briefly, then, Théo Besson, who is forty-eight and a bachelor, has been holidaying in Étretat for the last two weeks."

"At his step-mother's?"

"No. He hasn't been seeing her. I think they've quarrelled. He has a room at the Roches Blanches, the hotel you can see from here."

"Then he didn't go to La Bicoque?"

"Wait. When Charles Besson..."

Poor Castaing sighed, despairing of ever presenting a clear picture of the situation, particularly to a Maigret who did not seem to be listening.

"At eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, Charles Besson arrived with his wife and four children. They have a car, a big old-fashioned Panhard. Arlette got there before them. They all had lunch at La Bicoque. Then Charles Besson went down to the beach with his two eldest children, a boy of fifteen and a girl of twelve, while the ladies were gossiping."

"Did he meet his brother?"

"That's just it. I suspect that Charles Besson suggested the walk in order to have a drink at the Casino Bar. He's always willing to bend an elbow, if you can believe what you're told. He met Théo, whom he didn't know to be at Étretat, insisted on taking him back to La Bicoque, and Théo eventually let himself be persuaded. Therefore the whole family was there for dinner, a cold meal of crayfish and mutton."

"Nobody was ill?"

"No. Apart from the family, there was only the maid in the house. Charles Besson and his lot left about half-past nine. Claude, a five-year-old youngster, had been sleeping in the old lady's bedroom until then, and when they were just going to

get into the car, they had to give the bottle to the six-months-old baby, which was crying.”

“What’s Charles Besson’s wife’s name?”

“I should think her name is Emilienne, but they call her Mimi.”

“Mimi,” Maigret repeated solemnly, as if he were learning a lesson by heart.

“She’s a very dark-haired woman, about forty.”

“Very dark? Good! So they left in their Panhard about nine o’clock.”

“That’s right. Théo stayed a few more minutes, and then there were only the three other women in the house.”

“Valentine, her daughter Arlette and La Rose.”

“Exactly. La Rose washed up in the kitchen, while mother and daughter were chatting in the sitting-room.”

“The bedrooms are all upstairs?”

“Except the spare bedroom, which I told you is on the ground floor, with windows opening onto the garden. You’ll see for yourself. It’s a real doll’s house with tiny rooms.”

“Arlette didn’t go up to her mother’s room?”

“They went up together about ten o’clock, because the old lady wanted to show her daughter a dress she had just had made.”

“Did they come downstairs together?”

“Yes. Then Valentine went upstairs again for the night, followed in a few minutes by La Rose. She always helped her mistress get ready for bed and gave her the sleeping-draught.”

“Does she prepare it?”

“No. Valentine puts the drops in a glass of water beforehand.”

“Arlette didn’t go upstairs again?”

“No. It was about half-past eleven when La Rose went to bed herself.”

“And it was about two o’clock when she started to groan.”

“That’s what Arlette and her mother say.”

“And according to you, between midnight and two o’clock, there was a man in Arlette’s room, a man with whom she came from Paris. You don’t know how Théo spent the evening?”

“I’ve not had the time to deal with that yet. I must admit I haven’t thought about it.”

“Suppose we go and have lunch?”

“Gladly.”

“Do you think I’ll be able to have mussels?”

“Possibly, but I wouldn’t bank on it. I’m beginning to get to know the menu.”

“You’ve been at Rose’s parents’ house this morning?”

“I only saw the front room, turned into a mourning chapel.”

“You don’t know if they have a good picture of her?”

“I can ask them for one.”

“Please do. As many pictures of her as you can find, even as a child, at all ages. By the way, how old was she?”

“Twenty-two or twenty-three. I didn’t write the report and so...”

“I thought she had been with the old lady for a very long time.”

“For seven years. She went into service quite young, when Ferdinand Besson was alive. She was a hefty girl, with a rosy face and a big bosom.”

“She’s never been ill?”

“Dr. Jolly said nothing about it. I think he would have mentioned it.”

“I’d like to know if she had any sweethearts or a lover.”

“I thought of that. It seems she didn’t. She was a very serious-minded person and more or less never went out.”

“Because she wasn’t allowed to go out?”

“I may be mistaken, but I think Valentine kept her well in hand and didn’t give her much time off.”

All this while they had been walking along the seashore. It had been under Maigret’s eyes continually, and he had not thought about it for one moment.

It was over already. He had had that little shock in the morning at Bréauté-Beuzeville. The toy train had given him a whiff of former holidays.

Now he had ceased to notice the bright costumes of the bathers, the children squatting among the pebbles; he didn’t sense the iodine smell of the seaweed.

He had scarcely bothered to find out whether there would be mussels for lunch!

There he was, his head crammed with new names, which he was attempting to file away in his memory as he would have done in his office at the Quai des Orfèvres, and he sat down with Castaing at a white table, in front of some gladioli in a vase of imitation crystal.

Perhaps it was a sign that he was getting old? He moved his head to one side to look at the white-crested waves, and it made him gloomy not to feel his spirits lift at all.

“Were there many people at the funeral?”

“The whole of Yport was there, not to mention people who came from Étretat, Les Loges and Vaucottes, as well as the fishermen from Fécamp.”

He remembered other country funerals, imagined he caught a whiff of calvados, and said very seriously :

“The men will all be drunk this evening.”

“That’s very possible!” Castaing conceded, a little startled by the famous chief-inspector’s train of thought.

There weren't any mussels on the menu, and they ate sardines in oil and celery salad as an hors-d'oeuvre.

II

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The gate was not locked, so he pushed it open and, finding no bell, went on into the garden. Nowhere else had he seen such a profusion of plants in so small an area. The flowering bushes were so thick that it looked like a small jungle, and in the slightest free space bloomed dahlias, lupins, chrysanthemums and other flowers Maigret had only seen reproduced in bright colours on seed packets, in shop windows; and it seemed as if the old lady had been determined to use every packet.

From the road he had glimpsed the slate roof above the trees, but now he could no longer see the house. The path zig-zagged, and at one turning he should have gone right rather than left, for after a few paces he came out into a courtyard paved with large pink slabs, outside the kitchen and the wash-house.

A stout peasant-woman, dressed in black, black-haired with scarcely a trace of grey, strongly built and fierce-looking, was busy beating a mattress. Around her, out in the open, was scattered bedroom furniture, a bedside table with its door open, curtains and blankets hanging on a clothes-line, a chair with a straw seat, a bed which had been dismantled.

The woman was looking at him without interrupting her work.

“Is Madame Besson at home?”

She simply pointed towards some lattice windows surrounded by Virginia creeper; going up to them, he saw Valentine in her sitting-room. She didn't realize he was there, not expecting to see him arrive through the yard, and she was obviously getting ready to receive him. Having placed a silver tray with a crystal decanter and some glasses on a little table, she was standing back to judge the effect, then she looked at herself and arranged her hair in front of an old mirror in a moulded frame.

“You only have to knock,” the peasant-woman said gruffly.

He had not noticed that one of the windows was a french window, and he knocked on it; Valentine turned round, surprised, and at once put on a smile for his benefit.

“Of course I knew you were coming, but I hoped to welcome you at the main door, if one can say such a thing about this house.”

From the very beginning she made the same impression as in Paris. She was so alive, so sparkling that she was more like a young woman, even a very young woman, dressed up as an old lady for amateur theatricals. And yet she made no attempt to make herself look younger. On the contrary, the style of her black silk dress, the way she arranged her hair, the wide velvet ribbon she wore around her neck, everything was in keeping with her age.

And on looking closer, he could see the fine wrinkles of her skin, the withered neck and a certain dryness of the hands, about which there could be no mistake.

“May I take your hat, Inspector, and see if I can find an armchair your size? You must feel a little awkward in my doll’s house, don’t you?”

Perhaps her charm lay in the fact that she always seemed to be making fun of herself.

“You’ve probably been told, or you will be told, that I’m eccentric, and it’s true that I’m full of eccentricities. You can’t know how well they fill in the time when one lives alone. Suppose you try this armchair, near the window? Do please me by smoking your pipe. My husband used to smoke cigars from morning till night, and nothing gets into a house more than cigar smoke. Between ourselves, I don’t think he was very fond of it. He didn’t take to cigars until quite late, when he was well in his forties, exactly at the time that Juva Cream became famous.”

Then quickly, as if to excuse her unkind remark :

“We all have our weaknesses. I suppose you’ve already had some coffee at the hotel? Perhaps you will let me give you a glass of my calvados; it’s just over thirty years old.”

He had discovered that it was her eyes as much as her vivacity which gave her that youthful look. They were a brighter blue than the September sky above the sea, and they had a continual expression of surprise and astonishment, a kind of “Alice in Wonderland” expression.

“I shall have a drop as well, to keep you company, providing you won’t be shocked. You see, I don’t attempt to hide my tiny faults. You find the house all topsy-turvy. I have only just got back from poor Rose’s funeral. I had enormous difficulty in persuading Madame Leroy to come and give me a hand. I suppose you realized that it’s the furniture from Rose’s bedroom you saw outside. I loathe death, Inspector, and everything to do with it. Until the house has been cleaned from top to bottom and aired for several days, I shall still think there’s a smell of death about.”

Some thin rays of sun, passing through the branches of a lime tree, were coming into the room through the lattice windows and making flickering patterns on the furniture.

“I never imagined that one day the famous Inspector Maigret would be sitting in that armchair.”

“By the way, didn’t you tell me you had kept some newspaper articles about me?”

“That’s right. Quite frequently I have cut one out, just as I used to cut out the serial story from my father’s paper as a young girl.”

“Do you have them here?”

“I think I could find them.”

He had noticed a hesitation in her voice. She walked too naturally to an old desk, where she fumbled in vain in the drawers, and then to a carved cabinet.

“I believe I put them in my bedroom.”

She was about to go upstairs.

“Don’t trouble now.”

“But of course! I’m determined to find them. I can guess what you’re thinking. You imagine that I said all that in Paris

to flatter you and make you come. It's true that I occasionally tell a lie, like all women, but not this time, I promise you."

He heard her walking around upstairs, and when she came down again, she rather awkwardly put on an act of disappointment.

"Between ourselves, Rose was not a very tidy person; she was what I call a muddler. Tomorrow, I shall go and rummage in the attic. In any case, I'll lay my hands on those papers before you leave Étretat. Now, I expect you have heaps of questions to ask me, and I'm going to sit down quietly in my grandmother-chair. Your health, Monsieur Maigret."

He politely shook his head.

"You don't mind too much my having dragged you away from your Quai des Orfèvres? It's odd that my step-son should have had the same idea as I, isn't it? So much the Deputy, and so proud of it, he set about it differently and went straight to the Minister. Tell me frankly: was it because of him or of me that you came here?"

"Because of you, undoubtedly."

"Do you think I've something to be frightened of? How odd! I cannot make myself take the danger seriously. Old ladies are supposed to be nervous; I wonder why, when there are so many old ladies, like me, living alone in remote places. Rose used to sleep here, but she was the one who was frightened and used to come and wake me up in the night when she thought she heard a noise. If there was a storm, she would refuse to leave my room and stayed all night, sitting in my easy chair, in her nightdress, mumbling prayers and trembling all over.

"If I've never been afraid, perhaps it's because I cannot see who could possibly have anything against me. I'm not even rich any longer. Everyone round here knows I exist on a modest annuity, which was all that survived the wreck. This house, too, is only mine for life, and nobody will inherit it. I can't think that I've ever done anyone a bad turn..."

"Nevertheless Rose is dead."

“That’s true. I can’t help it if you think me stupid or selfish, but as time passes, and now that she’s buried, I find it difficult to believe. In a while, I expect you’ll go over the house. You can see the dining-room next door. That other door leads into the spare bedroom, where my daughter slept. Apart from the kitchen, the wash-house and a toolshed, there is nothing else on the ground floor, and it is even smaller upstairs, as there’s nothing over the kitchen and wash-house.”

“Does your daughter often come to see you?”

She put on a slight air of resignation.

“Once a year, on my birthday. The rest of the time I don’t see her, or hear anything about her. She hardly writes either.”

“She’s married to a dentist, I believe?”

“I suppose you’ll have to get to know the whole family history, and that’s only to be expected. Would you like me to be frank, Monsieur Maigret, or would you prefer that I spoke to you as a well-brought-up woman?”

“Is the question necessary?”

“You’ve not yet seen Arlette?”

“Not yet.”

She went to a drawer to fetch some old envelopes containing photographs, each envelope being assigned to a certain set of pictures.

“Look. There she is when she was eighteen. She’s supposed to look like me, and as far as features are concerned, I’m obliged to admit it.”

It was certainly striking. As small as her mother, the girl had the same fine features, and in particular, the same big bright eyes.

“As the saying goes, butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, would it? Poor Julien thought so and married her in spite of my warning; he’s a good boy, a hard worker; he started from nothing, had a lot of difficulty finishing his studies and now works ten hours a day or more in his poorer-class surgery in the Rue Saint-Antoine.”

“Do you think they’re unhappy?”

“He may be happy in spite of everything. Some people can find happiness all on their own. Every Sunday, he sets up his easel somewhere on the banks of the Seine, and paints. They have a canoe near Corbeil.”

“Does your daughter love her husband?”

“Look at these photos and answer for yourself. Perhaps she’s capable of loving somebody, but for my part I’ve never seen any sign of it. When I worked in the Seuret sisters’ pastry shop—you must have heard about that already—she once remarked to me :

“ ‘I suppose you think I like having a mother who sells cakes to my friends!’

“She was seven years old when she spoke to me like that. We lived together in a little room above a watchmaker’s shop, which is still there.

“When I re-married her life changed...”

“Would it upset you to talk to me about your first husband to start with?

“I’ll probably be told by other people, but I’d just as soon get the facts from you.”

She refilled his glass, not at all offended by his question.

“In that case I may as well start with my parents. My maiden name is Fouque, a name you will still find in this part of the world. My father was a fisherman here, at Étretat. My mother worked as a daily maid in houses like this, but only during the summer, as nobody stayed here in the winter in those days. I had three brothers and one sister, all of whom are dead. One of my brothers was killed during the 1914 war, and another one died as a result of an accident at sea. My sister married and died in childbirth. As for my third brother, Lucien, who worked in Paris as an apprentice hairdresser, he went to the bad and was knifed in a café near the Bastille.

“I’m not ashamed of them. I have never denied my origins. If I’d been ashamed, I should not have come to end my days

here, where everybody knows all about me.”

“Did you work while your parents were alive?”

“I was a children’s maid when I was fourteen, then a chambermaid at the Hôtel de la Plage. My mother died during that time, from a cancer of the breast. As for my father, he lived to be quite old, but he drank so much towards the end that he might just as well have been dead. I met a young man from Rouen, Henri Poujolle, who worked in the Post Office, and I married him. He was a nice person, very gentle, well brought up, and I didn’t know then what the high flush in his cheeks meant. For four years I played the part of a young housewife, and then of a young mother, in a three-roomed flat. I used to go to meet him after work, pushing the baby in the pram. On Sundays we would buy a cake from the Demoiselles Seuret.

“Once a year we went to Rouen, to see my parents-in-law, who kept a small grocery shop in the upper part of the town.

“Then Henri started coughing, and he was gone in a few months, leaving me alone with Arlette.

“I moved from the flat, making do with a single room. I went to see the Demoiselles Seuret and they took me on as an assistant.

“They said I was pretty and gay, and that that would attract customers.

“One day, in the shop, I met Ferdinand Besson.”

“How old were you?”

“When we were married a few months later, I was thirty.”

“And he?”

“About fifty-five. He had been a widower for some years and was the father of two sons aged sixteen and eighteen, and that was the funniest part of it all, as I felt all the time that they would fall in love with me.”

“And didn’t they?”

“Théo perhaps, at the beginning. Then he took a dislike to me, but I have never held it against him. Do you know Besson’s history?”

“I know that he owned Juva Products.”

“So you are imagining someone out of the ordinary? Well, the truth quite different. He was a chemist in a small way at Le Havre, a very small local chemist with a cramped, dingy shop, which had a green and a yellow show-bottle in the window. He himself, at forty, you will see in his photo, looked more like a gas employee, and his wife was like a charwoman.

“At that time, there weren’t so many specialized products as nowadays, and he often made up all sorts of prescriptions for his customers, That’s how he happened to concoct a cream for a young girl who always had pimples on her face. She was cured. It became known in the neighbourhood and then in the whole town.

“One of Besson’s brothers-in-law advised him to launch the product under a striking name, and between the two of them they found the right tag for it. It was the brother-in-law who put up the original capital.

“It made his fortune almost overnight. He had to build laboratories, first at Le Havre, then at Pantin, in the suburbs of Paris. The name ‘Juva’ was in all the papers and then it went up in enormous letters on wall advertisements.

“You can’t imagine what these products yield, once they are launched.

“Besson’s first wife hardly profited from it at all, as she died soon afterwards.

“He himself set about changing his way of life. When I first met him he was already a very rich man, but he wasn’t used to money and scarcely knew what to do with it.

“I think that was why he married me.”

“What do you mean?”

“He needed a pretty wife to dress up and show off. Parisian women used to terrify him. The well-to-do ladies of Le Havre

over-awed him. He felt more at ease with the girl he met behind the counter in a pastry-shop. I don't even think he minded that I was a widow and had a child of my own.

"I don't know if you quite understand?"

He did understand, but what astonished him was that she should have understood so well and admitted it so charmingly.

"Immediately after our marriage, he bought a private house in the Avenue d'Iéna, and a few years later, the Château d'Anzi in Sologne. He covered me with jewels, sent me to the *couturiers*, took me to the theatre and the races. He even had a yacht built, but never used it because he suffered from sea-sickness."

"Do you think he was happy?"

"I don't know. In his office in the Rue Tronchet he probably was, because he was surrounded by subordinates. Away from there, I think he always felt people were laughing at him. But he was a good man, as intelligent as most people who are in big business. Perhaps he began to have a lot of money when it was too late.

"He was determined to become a great industrial tycoon, and as well as Juva Cream, which was a gold-mine, he wanted to introduce other products: a toothpaste, a soap, heaven knows what else, and he spent millions on publicity for them. He put up factories, not only for the products themselves, but also for the containers, and Théo, who had gone into the business, possibly had even bigger ideas.

"All this lasted twenty-five years, Monsieur Maigret. I hardly remember anything about it now, the time passed so quickly. We were always in a rush. We went backwards and forwards from our house in Paris to our château, and from there to Cannes or Nice, only to return helter-skelter to Paris, with two cars, one of them for the luggage, the butler, the maids and the cook.

"Then he decided to travel once every year, and we went to London and Scotland, Turkey, Egypt, always in a hurry because business would be claiming him back, always with

trunks full of my clothes and jewellery which had to be taken to a bank for safe-keeping in every town.

“Arlette got married, I’ve never known why. Or rather I have never known why she suddenly married this boy, whom we didn’t even know, when she could have chosen any of the rich young men who regularly came to our house.”

“Did your husband have a soft spot for your daughter?”

“Admit that you are wondering whether it wasn’t more than a soft spot, aren’t you? I wondered about that too. It seems natural that a middle-aged man, living in the same house with a girl who’s not his daughter, should fall in love with her. I watched both of them. It’s true that he overwhelmed her with presents and indulged all her whims. I never discovered anything else. No! And I don’t know why Arlette married at the first opportunity, when she was only twenty. I understand most people, but I’ve never understood my own daughter.”

“Did you get on well with your step-sons?”

“Théo, the elder, soon gave me the cold shoulder, but Charles has always treated me as if I were his mother. Théo has never married. In fact, for a good many years, he led the sort of life my husband was not able to lead, because he was not prepared for it. Why are you looking at me like that?”

Because of the continual contrasts. She was talking lightly, her features lit up by a slight smile, with the same frank expression in her bright eyes, and he was surprised at the things she was saying.

“I’ve had time to think things over, you know, in the five years I’ve lived alone here! Well, Théo was always at the races, at Maxim’s, Fouquet’s, all the fashionable places, and he used to spend the summer at Deauville. At that time he kept open house, always surrounded by young people with grand names but no money. He continues to live in the same style, or rather he regularly goes to the same places, but now it’s his turn to be short of cash and get himself invitations. I don’t know how he manages it.”

“You weren’t surprised to find he was at Étretat?”

“We haven’t spoken to each other for a long time. I caught sight of him in town, two weeks ago, and I thought he was just passing through. Then, on Sunday, Charles brought him here, telling us both to make it up, and I gave him my hand.”

“He gave you no explanation for his presence here?”

“He simply said that he felt he needed a rest. But you’ve interrupted my story. I was talking about the time when my husband was still alive; the last ten years have not altogether been much fun.”

“When did he buy you this house?”

“Before the landslide began, at the time we had the house in Paris, the château, and the whole caboodle. I must admit that it was my idea to have a pied-à-terre here, where I feel more at home than anywhere else.”

Did he smile involuntarily? She said very quickly:

“I know what you’re thinking and perhaps you’re not entirely wrong. At Anzi I could play at being the châtelaine, as Ferdinand urged me to do. I used to preside over all sorts of good works and on all big occasions, but nobody knew who I was. It seemed to me unjust that they shouldn’t see me in my new colours in the town where I had been poor and humiliated. Perhaps it’s not very nice, but I think it’s human nature.

“It’s just as well I tell you myself, since everybody else will do so, and some of them even, sarcastically, call me the Châtelaine.

“Behind my back, they prefer simply to call me Valentine!

“I never knew anything about business, but it’s obvious that Ferdinand tried to do too much, not always at the right moment, perhaps not so much in order to outdo the others as to prove to himself that he was a great financier.

“It began with our selling the yacht, then the château. One evening after a ball, when I was giving him back my pearls to put in the safe, he said to me with a wry smile:

“ ‘I suppose, for the servants’ sake, it’s just as well. But it would be no great tragedy if they were stolen, since they’re only imitations now.’

“He became taciturn, solitary. Only Juva Cream was still worth something, whereas all the new products were collapsing one after the other.”

“Was he fond of his sons?”

“I don’t know. Does my answer sound odd to you? Parents are supposed to love their children. It seems natural. I now wonder if the contrary is not more often true than one thinks.

“He was certainly flattered to see Théo being received in select circles, where he dared not dream of being received himself. On the other hand he must have realized that Théo had no individual merit, and that his grandiose ideas had a lot to do with the landslide.

“As for Charles, he never forgave him for being a softy, because he pretended absolutely to despise softies and weaklings.”

“Because basically he was one himself, that’s really what you mean?”

“Yes. The fact remains that his last years were sad, watching his property collapse bit by bit. Perhaps he really did love me. He was not a demonstrative man, and I don’t remember his ever calling me ‘darling’. He wanted me to be provided for and gave me this house for life, made sure I had a small income before he died. It’s about all he left. His children only got a few worthless souvenirs, as did my daughter, for he made no distinction on her account.”

“Did he die here?”

“No. He died all alone in a hotel room in Paris where he had gone in the hope of making a new business deal. He was seventy years old. You’re now beginning to know the family. I’m not sure exactly what Théo does, but he still has a little car; he dresses well and lives in smart places. As for Charles, who has four children and a not very pleasant wife, he’s tried several careers without success. His pet project was to start a

newspaper. That failed both at Rouen and at Le Havre. Then, at Fécamp, he went into business making a fertilizer from the innards of fish, and when that didn't go too badly he stood for some party or other in the elections.

"He was elected by some stroke of luck and has been a Deputy for two years.

"None of them is a saint, but they are not a wicked lot either.

"Even if they don't love me blindly, I don't think they hate me, and my death would be of no advantage to any of them.

"The odds and ends you see here wouldn't bring in a large sum in an auction-room, and these things, together with the replicas of my former jewels, are all I personally possess.

"As for the people in the district, they're used to the old lady and almost look on me as part of the landscape.

"Nearly all those whom I knew in my youth are gone. Only a few old people remain, such as the elder Mademoiselle Seuret, whom I visit now and again.

"The idea that anybody should think of poisoning me seems so impossible, so absurd, that I'm a little embarrassed at seeing you here and ashamed, now, of having gone to Paris to fetch you.

"You must have thought me a crazy old lady, didn't you?"

"No."

"Why? What could have made you think it was serious?"

"La Rose is dead!"

"That's true."

She glanced out of the window, saw the furniture scattered about the yard, the bedclothes hanging on the line.

"Is your gardener here today?"

"No. He came yesterday."

"Did the charwoman carry all the furniture down herself?"

“We took them to pieces and carried them down ourselves, early this morning, before I went to Yport.”

The furniture was heavy and the stairs were narrow, with an awkward turning.

“I’m stronger than I look, Monsieur Maigret. I may seem as though I have bird bones, and it’s true they’re not very large. But in spite of her size, Rose was no stronger than I.”

She got up to fill his glass and poured herself a little of the old golden calvados, the scent of which was filling the room.

She was surprised at the question Maigret next asked, quietly, as he drew gently at his pipe.

“Do you think your son-in-law—Julien Sudre, isn’t it?—is a complaisant husband?”

She laughed, astonished.

“I’ve never asked myself that question.”

“You’ve never wondered whether your daughter had one or more lovers?”

“Good heavens! I shouldn’t be surprised if she did.”

“There was a man here, in the spare bedroom, with your daughter, on Sunday night.”

She frowned and pondered on this.

“Now I understand.”

“What do you understand?”

“A few details which didn’t strike me as being important at the time. Arlette had been distracted and preoccupied the whole day. After lunch she suggested going for a walk along the beach with Charles’s children and seemed disappointed when he wanted to go himself. When I asked her why her husband hadn’t come with her, she told me he had a landscape to finish on the banks of the Seine.

“ ‘Are you staying the night?’

“ ‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. Perhaps I’d better take the evening train.’

“I insisted. Several times I caught her gazing out of the window, and now I remember that at nightfall a car crawled past the house two or three times.”

“What did you talk about?”

“It’s difficult to say. Mimi had to look after her baby, which had to be changed several times. She also had to get the bottle ready and keep Claude quiet; he’s five and was making a mess of the flower-beds. We naturally spoke about the children. Arlette said to Mimi that her last must have come as a surprise, after five years, when the eldest was already fifteen, and Mimi replied that Charles wasn’t going to get any more, that it wasn’t he who had all the trouble...

“You know what it’s like! We swapped recipes.”

“Didn’t Arlette go up to your room after dinner?”

“Yes. I wanted to show her a dress I recently had made, and I tried it on for her.”

“Where was she standing?”

“She was sitting on the bed.”

“Did you leave her alone?”

“For a moment perhaps, while I went to get my dress from the closet where I keep my linen. But I can’t see Arlette pouring poison into the bottle of medicine. Besides, she would have had to open the medicine chest, and that’s in the bathroom. I should have heard her. Why would Arlette have done that? So poor Julien is being deceived?”

“A man joined Arlette in her bedroom after midnight and must have left hurriedly through the window when he heard Rose groaning.”

She could not help laughing.

“That was bad luck!”

But, retrospectively, it did not seem to alarm her.

“Who was it? Someone from here?”

“Someone who brought her down from Paris in his car, a certain Hervé Peyrot, in the wine trade.”

“Young?”

“About forty.”

“I was surprised, too, that she came by train, since her husband has a car and she can drive. It’s all very strange, Monsieur Maigret. I’m really glad that you’re here. The inspector took the glass and the medicine bottle away with him, as well as various things from my bedroom and the bathroom. I’m curious to know what the laboratory people will find out. Some plain-clothes policemen also came and took photographs. And if only La Rose had not been so pig-headed! I told her the medicine had a funny taste, and yet once she was out of the room she swallowed all that was left in the glass. She didn’t need a sleeping-draught, I can assure you. How many times did I hear her snoring the other side of the wall, almost as soon as she was in bed! Perhaps you’d like to go over the house?”

He had hardly been there an hour, and he already felt that he knew her, that she was an old acquaintance. The charwoman’s silhouette— she was surely a widow!—appeared in the doorway.

“Will you eat the rest of the stew this evening, or shall I give it to the cat?”

She said this in almost a nasty way, without a smile.

“I shall eat it, Madame Leroy.”

“I’ve finished outside. Everything’s clean. When you’re ready to help me carry up the furniture...”

Valentine gave Maigret a sidelong smile.

“In just a minute.”

“I’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Well, have a rest for a while.”

And she led the way up the narrow staircase that smelt of wax polish.

III

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Come and see me whenever you like, Monsieur Maigret. The least I can do is to be at your disposal, after asking you to come from Paris. I hope you're not too angry with me for having put you out over this fantastic story?"

They were in the garden, just as he was leaving. The widow Leroy was still waiting for her mistress to help her carry the furniture up to Rose's bedroom. For a moment Maigret had almost offered to help, so difficult was it to imagine Valentine carrying heavy objects.

"I'm surprised now that I insisted so much on your coming, because I'm not the least bit frightened."

"Is Madame Leroy going to sleep here?"

"Oh, no! She'll be gone in an hour. She has a twenty-four-year-old son who works on the railway and she pampers him like a baby. She's getting fidgety now because he'll be home soon."

"You'll be sleeping alone in the house?"

"It won't be the first time."

He had crossed the garden and pushed open the gate, which creaked a little. The sun was sinking over the sea and bathing the path in a yellow light, already tinged with red. It was a road just like those he had known in his childhood, not tarred, where one's feet kicked up the soft dust, bordered with hedges and stinging nettles.

A little farther down he came to a bend in the road and at this bend he saw, coming towards him, the silhouette of a woman, slowly climbing the hill.

She had the light behind her and was sombrely dressed, and without ever having seen her before, he recognized her: it was undeniably Arlette, the old lady's daughter. She was not quite so small and slender as her mother, but she had the same fragility and, like her, she seemed to be made from some

delicate and precious stuff; and she had the same enormous eyes of an incredible blue.

Did she recognize the chief-inspector, whose photograph had appeared so often in the papers? Did she simply say to herself, when she saw a stranger dressed in city clothes on this road, that he could only be a policeman?

In the brief moment that they passed each other, it seemed to Maigret that she was hesitating as if to speak to him. He hesitated himself. He wanted to speak to her, but it was not the right time or place.

So they only looked at each other in silence, and Arlette's eyes revealed nothing. They were grave and there was something vague about them, something impersonal. Maigret looked back, after she had disappeared from view behind the hedge, then he continued on his way as far as the first streets of Étretat.

He met Inspector Castaing in front of a postcard stand.

"I was waiting for you, Chief-Inspector. I've just received the reports. I've got them in my pocket. Do you want to read them?"

"Before anything else I'd like to sit on a terrace and drink a glass of cold beer."

"Didn't she give you a drink?"

"She gave me a calvados, which was so old and so special that it's made me want something more vulgar and thirst-quenching."

The sun, sinking towards the sea, since the middle of the afternoon, like a huge red ball, was a sign of the approaching end of the season, as were the few holiday-makers, already wearing woollen clothes, who had been driven by the cold from the beach into the streets and didn't know what to do with themselves.

"Arlette has just arrived," Maigret said when they had sat down at a café table in the Place de la Mairie.

"Have you seen her?"

“I suppose she came by train this time.”

“Has she gone to her mother’s? Did you speak to her?”

“We just passed each other about a hundred yards from La Bicoque.”

“Do you think she’ll stay the night?”

“Quite probably.”

“There’s nobody else in the house, is there?”

“Only the mother and the daughter will be there tonight.”

The inspector pondered this.

“You’re not going to condemn me to read all these papers?”
Maigret said, pushing aside a large yellow envelope stuffed with documents. “Tell me about the medicine-glass first. Were you the one who found it and wrapped it up?”

“Yes. It was in the maid’s room on her bedside table. I asked Madame Besson if it was definitely the glass which had held the medicine. There could have been no mistake, it seems, as the glass was slightly tinted, the only one left of an old set.”

“Finger-prints?”

“The old lady’s and Rose’s.”

“And the bottle?”

“I found the bottle containing the sleeping-draught in the medicine chest in the bathroom, where I was told it would be. Only the fingerprints of the old lady were on it. By the way, did you see her bedroom?”

Like Castaing, Maigret had also been surprised when he had entered Valentine’s bedroom. She had opened the door for the chief-inspector with an air of assumed simplicity, not saying a word, but she must have been aware of the effect the room would produce.

Although the rest of the house was pretty, in good taste, showing a certain elegance, one didn’t expect suddenly to find oneself in so luxurious a bedroom, all furnished in cream satin. In the centre of the enormous bed, a blue Persian cat was

having a siesta, and it had barely half-opened its golden eyes in honour of the intruder.

“Perhaps rather a ridiculous setting for an old woman, isn’t it?”

When they went through into the yellow-tiled bathroom, she had added:

“Probably it’s the result of never having had my own room as a young girl, of sleeping with my sisters in an attic, and our having to go and wash in the yard, at the rim of the well. In the Avenue d’Iéna Ferdinand gave me a pink-marble bathroom, with the accessories all silver-gilt, and one walked down three steps to get into the bath.”

Rose’s room was empty, with a little breeze blowing out the cretonne curtains so that they looked like crinolines, a waxed floor, and a flowered wall-paper.

“What does the police doctor say?”

“It was unquestionably a case of poisoning. A strong dose of arsenic. It wasn’t the sleeping-draught itself which brought about the maid’s death. The report adds that the liquid must have had a very bitter taste.”

“That’s what Valentine said. ”

“And yet La Rose drank it. Do you see that man coming along the opposite pavement, making for the newsagent’s? That’s Théo Besson.”

He was a tall, big-boned man, with strongly marked features, who looked about fifty years old. He was wearing a rust-coloured tweed suit, which made him look very English. He was bare-headed, his hair grey and rather thin.

He noticed the two men. He already knew the inspector and probably recognized Chief-Inspector Maigret. Like Arlette, he hesitated, gave them a slight bow and went into the newsagent’s shop.

“Have you questioned him?”

“Only in passing. I asked him if he had a statement to make and if he was staying long at Étretat. He told me that he didn’t

intend leaving the town until the 15th of September, when his hotel closes.”

“What does he do all day?”

“He does a lot of walking, along the coast, all on his own, striding along like a middle-aged man who wants to keep fit.

“He goes for a swim about eleven o’clock and spends the rest of the time hanging around the casino bar and the bistros.”

“Does he drink a lot?”

“He has about ten whiskies a day, but I don’t think he gets drunk. He reads four or five papers. Sometimes he gambles, but not much, and he never sits down at the tables.”

“Anything else in the reports?”

“Nothing of interest.”

“Théo Besson hasn’t seen his step-mother since Sunday?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Who has seen her? Tell me briefly what happened on Monday. Sunday’s all right, but I’m not clear as to Monday.”

He knew what Valentine had done on Tuesday. She had told him. She had left La Bicoque early in the morning, leaving Madame Leroy there alone, and had taken the first train to Paris. She had gone by taxi to the Quai des Orfèvres, where she had had her interview with the chief inspector.

“Did you go to see your daughter afterwards?” he had asked her just now.

“No. Why?”

“Do you never go to see her when you’re in Paris?”

“Very rarely. They have their lives to live and I have mine. Besides that, I don’t like the Saint-Antoine district where they live, nor their little middle-class flat.”

“What did you do?”

“I had lunch in a restaurant in the Rue Duphot, where I always like to eat, and then I did some shopping near the Madeleine before I caught my train.”

“Did your daughter know you were in Paris?”

“No.”

“Nor your step-son, Charles?”

“I didn’t say anything to him about my plan.”

Now he wanted to know what happened on the Monday.

“When I arrived about eight o’clock,” Castaing said, “I found the house in a state of agitation, as you may well imagine.”

“Who was there?”

“Madame Besson, naturally.”

“How was she dressed?”

“In her usual clothes. Her daughter was there as well, with her hair not done, wearing slippers. Dr. Jolly was with them, a middle-aged man, a friend of the family, calm, level-headed, and the old gardener had just arrived. As for Charles Besson, he had arrived a few seconds before me.”

“Who told you what had happened?”

“Valentine. From time to time the doctor interrupted to ask her an important detail. She told me it was she who had telephoned her step-son to let him know. He was very upset by what he called the ‘catastrophe’. He seemed relieved to see that the reporters were not yet on the spot and that the people in the district knew nothing about it. You have just seen his brother. He’s like him, but fatter and flabbier.

“My task was complicated by the fact that there’s no telephone at the house, for I had to ring Le Havre several times and each time I was obliged to go into the town.

“The doctor left first, because he had some patients to see.”

“Were La Rose’s parents notified?”

“No. Nobody seemed to think of them. I went to Yport myself to let them know. The father was out fishing. A brother and the mother went back with me.”

“How did it go off?”

“Rather badly. The mother looked at Madame Besson as if she held her responsible for what had happened and didn’t say a word to her. As for the brother, he flew into a rage, when Charles Besson said something or other to him.

“ ‘They’d better find out the truth, and don’t think I’ll let you hush this business up because you’ve got a lot of strings you can pull!’

“They wanted to take the body to Yport. I had difficulty convincing them that it would have to be taken to Le Havre first of all for the autopsy.

“While this was going on, the father arrived on his bicycle. He didn’t say anything to anybody. He’s short and stocky, very strong and well built. When the body had been put in the van, he took his family away. Charles Besson offered to take them back in his car, but they refused, and the three of them went off on foot, the old man pushing his bicycle.

“I can’t guarantee the exact order of the events I’m going to tell you about. Some neighbours began to arrive, and then people from the town forced their way into the garden. I was upstairs with Cornu, from the Criminal Records Department, who was taking photographs and collecting finger-prints.

“When I came downstairs about noon, I couldn’t see Arlette, and her mother told me she was going to leave for Paris, because she was afraid her husband would be worrying about her.

“Charles Besson remained until about three o’clock in the afternoon and then returned to Fécamp.”

“Did he say anything to you about me?”

“No. Why?”

“He didn’t say he intended to ask the Minister to put me in charge of the case?”

“He didn’t say anything to me, except that he would make the necessary arrangements with the newspapers. There’s nothing else to say about Monday. Oh, yes! In the evening, I saw Théo Besson, who had been pointed out to me, in the street, and I stopped and had a few words with him.

“ ‘I suppose you’re aware of what’s happened at La Bicoque?’

“ ‘I’ve heard about it.’

“ ‘You have no information which might help me in my investigations?’

“ ‘Absolutely none.’

“He was very cold and distant. It was then I asked him if he was intending to leave Étretat and you know his reply. Now, if you don’t need me this evening, I shall return to Le Havre to write my report. I promised my wife that I would be home for dinner if possible, as we have guests.”

He had left his car in front of the hotel, and Maigret accompanied him through the quiet streets, from which, at cross-roads every so often, they could see a strip of sea.

“Aren’t you a bit worried that Arlette is sleeping at her mother’s tonight, and that the two women will be alone in the house?”

He was obviously concerned about it himself, and perhaps Maigret’s composure led him to think that he was taking the thing too lightly.

As the sun became redder and the roof-tops seemed to be aflame, the sea in places became an icy green colour, and one could have imagined that the world, which the setting sun was leaving, was beginning to harden into a lifeless eternity.

“What time would you like me to come tomorrow morning?”

“Not before nine. Perhaps you would telephone Police Headquarters for me, to get all possible information on Arlette Sudre and her husband. I’d also like to know what sort of life Charles Besson leads when he’s in Paris, and while you’re about it, by the way, see what they can dig up about Théo. Try to get onto Lucas. I don’t want to telephone about those sort of things from here.”

Most of the passers-by were turning to look at them and people were watching from behind the shop-windows. Maigret

still did not know what he would do that evening or how he would go about the case. From time to time he said to himself mechanically :

“La Rose is dead.”

She was the only person of whom he still knew nothing, except that she was plump and had a big bosom.

“Tell me something,” he said to Castaing, who was starting his car. “She must have had some personal belongings in her room at Valentine’s. What’s happened to them?”

“Her parents stuffed them in her suitcase and took it away.”

“Did you ask to see them?”

“I didn’t dare. If you go down there, you’ll understand. There’s nothing friendly about their welcome. They watch you suspiciously and look at each other before replying in monosyllables.”

“I’ll probably go and see them tomorrow.”

“I’d be surprised if Charles Besson doesn’t come and pay you a visit. Since he was so keen to get the Minister to put you on the case!”

Castaing set off in his little car along the Le Havre road, and Maigret, before returning to his hotel walked towards the terrace of the casino, which had a good view of the beach. It was purely mechanical. He was obeying the sort of impulse which draws town-dwellers, when they are at the seaside, to go and watch the sunset.

Sure enough, all the holiday-makers still at Étretat were there, girls in bright dresses, a few old ladies, looking out for the famous green light which would flash on the waves at the precise moment that the red ball sank below the horizon.

Maigret’s eyes hurt him, so he didn’t see the green light, but walked into the bar and was surprised to hear a familiar voice :

“What will it be, Inspector?”

“Good heavens! Charlie!”

A barman he had known in a place on the Rue Danou and was surprised to find here.

“I never thought you would be coming down to deal with this business. What do you make of it?”

“What do you?”

“I think the old lady had a lucky break and the skivvy was just unfortunate.”

Maigret drank a calvados, because he was in Normandy and because he had started on it. Charlie attended to the other customers. Théo Besson came and sat down on one of the high stools and unfolded a Paris newspaper he had probably just been to fetch from the station.

Outside, apart from a few clouds still tinged with red, the world had lost all colour, with the blank infinity of the sky making a lid for the vastness of the sea.

“La Rose is dead.”

Dead because she drank some medicine which was not meant for her and which she did not need.

He hung around a little longer, feeling sluggish after the calvados, then walked towards his hotel, its façade looking chalky-white in the dusk. He passed between the green plants lining the steps, pushed open the door and walked along the red carpet to the office, intending to collect his key. The manager leaned towards him, confidentially:

“A lady has been waiting for you for some time.”

And he glanced towards some armchairs, covered in red velvet, in the corner of the hall.

“I told her I didn’t know when you’d be coming back, and she said she’d wait. It’s...”

He muttered a name so indistinctly that Maigret was not able to catch it. But as he turned he recognized Arlette Sudre, who at that moment rose from her chair.

He was better able to notice her elegance than he had been that afternoon, perhaps because she was the only person here

in town clothes, with a very Parisian hat, the sort one would expect to see at a cocktail party somewhere near the Madeleine.

He went up to her, not quite at his ease.

“You’ve been waiting for me, I believe? Chief-Inspector Maigret.”

“I’m Arlette Sudre, as you already know.”

He nodded his head to show he was aware who she was. Neither spoke for a moment. She glanced around her, as if to suggest she found it difficult to say anything in the hall, where an old couple were staring at them, all ears.

“I expect you’d like to speak to me in private. Unfortunately we’re not at the Quai des Orfèvres. I don’t quite see where...”

He was also looking around. He couldn’t invite her up to his room. The waitresses could be seen laying the tables in the dining-room, which was large enough to hold two hundred people, although there would be less than two dozen that evening.

“Perhaps the easiest way would be for you to have something to eat with me? I can ask for a quiet table...”

More at her ease than he was, she accepted the suggestion naturally, without thanking him, and followed him into the still empty room.

“May we eat now?” he asked the waitress.

“In a few minutes. You can sit down now. For two?”

“Just a moment. Could we have something to drink?”

He turned to Arlette, interrogatively.

“A martini,” she said quietly.

“Two martinis.”

He was still feeling embarrassed, and it wasn’t entirely due to the fact that a man had spent part of Sunday night in Arlette’s bedroom. She was just the sort of pretty woman a man would pick up and take out to an intimate dinner,

watching people coming in at the door, afraid of being recognized. And he was going to have dinner with her, here.

She didn't attempt to help him, but looked at him quietly, as if it was for him to speak and not her.

"So you've come back from Paris!" he said, giving up the struggle.

"Surely you can guess why?"

She was possibly prettier than her mother had ever been, but unlike Valentine, she did not put herself out to please, but remained distant and her look lacked warmth.

"Well, if you don't know I shall tell you."

"Are you referring to Hervé?"

The martinis arrived and she lifted her glass to her lips, took a handkerchief from her black suède handbag and automatically picked up a lipstick, but didn't use it.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked him, looking him straight in the eye.

"I don't quite understand your question."

"I've not had much experience of this sort of thing, but I occasionally read the newspapers. When something happens like last Sunday night, the police usually rout out the private lives of everyone mixed up in it, however remotely, and it's no advantage being innocent. As I'm married and very fond of my husband, I'm asking you what you intend to do."

"About the handkerchief?"

"If you like."

"Your husband doesn't know about it?"

He saw her lip tremble, either from impatience or anger, and then she said:

"You talk like my mother."

"Because your mother thought your husband might have known about your extra-marital activities?"

She gave a little scornful laugh.

“You choose your words carefully, don’t you?”

“If you prefer, I shall stop being so careful. From what you have just told me, your mother has got the idea, that your husband is what is called a complaisant husband.”

“Even if she doesn’t think so, that’s what she said.”

“As I don’t know your husband from Adam, I haven’t had the opportunity to form an opinion. Now...”

Her eyes were still fixed on him, and he felt like being unpleasant:

“Now you can’t blame anybody but yourself if somebody gets that idea. You’re thirty-eight, I believe? You have been married since you were twenty. It’s too much to believe that Sunday’s incident was the first of its kind.”

She gave tit for tat:

“You’re right, it’s not the first time.”

“You had only one night to spend in your mother’s house and yet you simply had to have your lover there with you.”

“Perhaps we’re not often able to spend a night together?”

“I’m not judging you. I’m merely stating a fact. Little wonder if one imagines that your husband knows about it...”

“He didn’t and he still doesn’t. That’s why I came back, after leaving in such a rush.”

“Why did you leave at mid-day on Monday?”

“I had no idea what happened to Hervé after he left the house when Rose started groaning. I didn’t know what my husband would do when he heard the news. I wanted to prevent his coming here.”

“I understand. And as soon as you got to Paris you began to worry.”

“Yes. I telephoned Charles and he told me you were taking over the case.”

“That reassured you?”

“No.”

“May I bring the soup, sir?”

He nodded his head, and the interview was interrupted until the soup had arrived.

“Will my husband find out?”

“It’s not likely. Not unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Do you suspect me of trying to poison my mother?”

For a moment his spoon remained suspended between his plate and his mouth, and he looked at her with amazement, mixed with a sneaking admiration.

“Why do you ask me that?”

“Because I was the only person in the house who could have put poison in the glass. Or more exactly, I was the only person still in the house when it happened.”

“You mean that Mimi could have done it before she went home?”

“Mimi, or Charles, or even Théo. Only they will inevitably think of me.”

“Why inevitably?”

“Because everyone is convinced that I don’t love my mother.”

“And it’s true?”

“It’s more or less true.”

“Would it annoy you too much if I asked you a few questions? I’m not doing it officially, mind. It was you who came to see me.”

“You would have asked them some time or other, wouldn’t you?”

“It’s possible; it’s even very likely.”

Three tables away from them the old couple were eating, and there was also a middle-aged woman, who kept her eyes fixed on her eighteen-year-old son, whom she was feeding like a child. Waves of high, loud laughter came from a table of young girls.

Maigret and his companion were talking in undertones, in an apparently calm, unconcerned manner, as they ate.

“Have you disliked your mother for a long time?”

“Since the day I found out she’d never loved me, that I had only been an accident and that she felt I had ruined her life.”

“When did you discover all this?”

“When I was still a little girl. Anyhow, I’m wrong to refer only to myself. I should have said Mother has never loved anybody, not even me.”

“She didn’t love your father either?”

“As soon as he was dead, she forgot all about him. I bet you wouldn’t be able to find a single photograph of my father in the house. You were there just now. You saw Mother’s bedroom. Did anything strike you as odd?”

He thought hard and then admitted:

“No.”

“Perhaps you haven’t been inside old women’s houses very often. In most of them there are lots of photographs on the walls and on the furniture.”

She was right. Nevertheless he remembered one picture, a picture of an old man, in a magnificent silver frame, on the table beside the bed.

“My step-father,” she replied when he mentioned this. “In the first place it was put there because of the frame. In the second place he’s still the one-time owner of Juva Products and that counts for something. And finally he spent half his life satisfying my mother’s every whim and giving her everything she’s had. Did you see a photo of me? Or of my step-brothers? Charles, for example, has a passion for having his children photographed at all ages, and he sends prints to the whole family. In Mother’s house, they’re all in a drawer, with pencil ends, old letters, cotton reels and everything else. But there are photos of her on the walls, and of her motor-cars, her château, her yacht, her cats, most of all her cats.”

“I can certainly see that you’re not fond of her!”

“I don’t think I even resent her for it any longer.”

“For what?”

“It doesn’t matter. Nevertheless, if somebody did try to poison her...”

“I beg your pardon. You used the word *if*.”

“Let’s say it was just a way of speaking. Yet with Mother you can never know.”

“Are you insinuating that she’d be capable of pretending to have been poisoned?”

“I know that can’t be right, particularly as there was poison in the glass, and enough to be fatal, seeing that poor Rose is dead.”

“Did your step-brothers and your sister-in-law share your... let’s say indifference, if not dislike, for your mother?”

“Not for the same reasons. Mimi doesn’t like her much because she thinks that my step-father wouldn’t have lost his fortune but for her.”

“Is that true?”

“I don’t know. Certainly he spent most of the money on her, and he wanted to impress her more than anything else.”

“How did you get on with your step-father?”

“Almost immediately after the wedding, Mother sent me to a very smart, very expensive finishing-school in Switzerland, making the excuse that my father had been tubercular and my lungs had to be looked after.”

“Why do you say it was an excuse?”

“I’ve never coughed in my life. It was just that the presence of a grown-up daughter used to embarrass her. And perhaps she was jealous.”

“Of what?”

“Ferdinand had a tendency to spoil me, to pamper me. When I came back to Paris, at seventeen, he began to hang around me persistently.”

“Do you mean...”

“No. Not straight away. I was eighteen and a half when it happened, one evening as I was dressing for the theatre; he came into my room before I was quite ready.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. He lost his head and I slapped him. Then he fell at my feet and began to weep, begging me not to say anything to Mother and not to go away. He promised it was only a moment’s madness and that it would never happen again.”

She added coldly:

“He looked ridiculous, in evening dress, his shirt-front sticking out of his waistcoat. He had to get up in a hurry because the maid was coming in.”

“Did you stay?”

“Yes.”

“Was there someone you were in love with?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Théo.”

“And was he in love with you?”

“He didn’t pay any attention to me. He had his own rooms on the ground floor and I knew that, in spite of his father’s forbidding it, he used to have women in there. I spent nights spying on them. There was one, a little dancer from the Châtelet, who, at one time, came almost every night. I hid in his rooms.”

“And did you make a scene?”

“I don’t know what I did exactly, except that she went off terribly angry and I was left with Théo.”

“And then?”

“He didn’t want to. I almost forced him.”

She was speaking quietly, in such a natural tone that it was almost unreal, especially in that middle-class, holiday atmosphere, with the waitress in her black dress and white apron interrupting them from time to time.

“And afterwards?” he repeated.

“There was no afterwards. We kept out of each other’s way.”

“Why?”

“I suppose he felt embarrassed.”

“And you?”

“Because I was disgusted with men.”

“Is that why you got married so suddenly?”

“Not immediately. For more than a year I slept with every man who came along.”

“From disgust?”

“Yes. But you won’t be able to understand.”

“And then?”

“I decided that things were getting too bad; I was sick of it and I wanted to put an end to it all.”

“By getting married?”

“By trying to live like everyone else.”

“And you carried on even after your marriage?”

She looked at him gravely and said :

“Yes.”

There was a long silence, during which they heard the girls at the other table laughing loudly.

“From the first year?”

“From the first month.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Because I can’t help it. Julien has never suspected me and I’d do anything to prevent his finding out.”

“Do you love him?”

“I don’t care if it makes you laugh, but the answer is *Yes!* In any case he’s the only man I have any respect for. Have you any other questions to ask me?”

“When I’ve digested everything you’ve just told me I probably shall.”

“Take your time.”

“Are you intending to stay the night at La Bicoque?”

“There’s nothing else I can do. People would misunderstand it if I went to a hotel, and there aren’t any more trains until tomorrow morning.”

“Did you quarrel with your mother?”

“When?”

“This afternoon.”

“We coolly told each other a few home-truths, as usual. It’s almost become a game when we’re together.”

She had no dessert, and before she left the table she put on some lipstick, looking at herself in a little mirror, and dabbed at her face with a tiny powder-puff.

Her eyes were incredibly clear, clearer and a brighter blue than Valentine’s, but as empty as the sky had been earlier, when Maigret had looked in vain for the green light.

IV

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Maigret was wondering whether the end of their meal would also mean the end of the interview or whether they would continue it somewhere else, and Arlette was busy lighting a cigarette when the manager came up to the chief-inspector and spoke to him in such an exaggerated whisper that Maigret had to ask him to repeat what he had said :

“You’re wanted on the telephone.”

“Who by?”

Whereupon the manager looked at the young woman meaningly, so much so that both of them misunderstood it. Arlette’s features hardened, but without losing their look of indifference.

“Will you tell me who wants me on the telephone?” the chief-inspector demanded impatiently.

And the man, annoyed, as if forced against his will to reveal a state secret:

“Monsieur Charles Besson.”

Maigret smiled slyly at Arlette, who must have been thinking it was her husband, and stood up, asking her:

“Will you wait for me?”

She lowered her eyelids in assent, and he made his way to the telephone box, accompanied by the manager, who was explaining :

“It would have been better to have sent you a note, wouldn’t it? I must also apologize for a mistake made by one of my staff. It seems that Monsieur Besson rang you two or three times during the day, and they forgot to tell you when you came in for dinner.”

It was a loud voice at the other end of the line, the sort of voice which makes the instrument vibrate.

“Chief-Inspector Maigret? I’m terribly sorry, most upset. I don’t know how to apologize, but perhaps you’ll forgive me when I tell you what has happened.”

Maigret didn’t have time to say a word. The voice continued:

“I tear you away from your work and your family. I make you come to Étretat and I’m not even there to welcome you. I assure you I did intend to be at the station this morning and I tried in vain to get in touch with the station-master by telephone to leave you a message. Hallo!”

“Yes?”

“Last night, you see, I had to leave for Dieppe in a hurry because my wife’s mother was dying.”

“Did she die?”

“Not until this afternoon, and as she has no sons and I was the only man in the house, I was forced to stay. You know how these things are. You’ve got to think of everything. Unexpected things happen. I couldn’t telephone you from the home because the dying woman couldn’t bear the slightest sound, but I escaped three times for a few minutes to call you from a neighbouring bar. It’s been terrible.”

“Did she suffer much?”

“Not specially, but she died very slowly.”

“How old was she?”

“Eighty-eight. I’m now back at Fécamp, busy looking after our children, because I’ve left my wife there. She’s only got the baby with her. But if you wish I can come in my car and see you this evening. Otherwise, tell me what time tomorrow morning will be most convenient for you, and I’ll make it my business to be there.”

“Have you anything to tell me?”

“You mean about what happened on Sunday?”

“I know no more than you’ve already found out. Ah! I did want to let you know that all the Normandy papers, both in

Rouen and in Le Havre, have promised me not to say anything about this business. In actual fact, there'll be nothing about it in the Paris papers either. It wasn't an easy matter. I had to go to Rouen myself on Tuesday morning. They reported the thing in three lines, saying that it was presumably an accident."

At last he stopped for breath, but the chief-inspector had nothing to say to him.

"Are you comfortable at your hotel? Have they given you a good room? I hope you're going to get to the bottom of this awful business. I don't know whether you're an early riser or not. Would it suit you if I came to the hotel at nine o'clock?"

"If that's all right for you."

"I should like to thank you very much and also to apologize once again."

When Maigret came out of the telephone box, he found Arlette alone in the dining-room, her elbows on the table, while they were clearing away the things.

"He had to go to Dieppe," he said.

"Has she died at last?"

"Had she been ill?"

"She's pretended to be dying for the past twenty or thirty years. Charles must be delighted."

"He didn't like her much?"

"She'll have saved his bacon for a while, since he'll inherit a lot of money. You don't know Dieppe?"

"Not well."

"The Montets own roughly a quarter of the houses in the town. He'll be rich, but he's sure to find a way to lose it all in some senseless business deal. Unless Mimi stops him, as it's really her own money, and I think she's capable of looking after herself."

It was curious: she said these things without animosity; there was no hint of spite or envy in her voice; it was as if she spoke of people simply as she found them, and they appeared

in a harsher light than they would have done in identification photographs.

Maigret had sat down again opposite her and filled his pipe, which he was hesitating to light.

“Please tell me when I begin to be in the way.”

“You don’t seem in a hurry to get back to La Bicoque.”

“I’m not.”

“So you prefer anybody’s company to that.”

He knew it wasn’t that, but that now she had started to speak about herself she probably wanted to say more. Yet in this vast room, where three-quarters of the lights had just been switched off and the staff were making it plain that they were a nuisance, it was difficult to take up the interview where they had left off.

“Would you like to go somewhere else?”

“Where? In a bar we run the risk of meeting Théo, and I’d prefer to avoid him.”

“Are you still in love with him?”

“No. I don’t know.”

“Do you hold anything against him?”

“I don’t know. Come on. We can always go for a walk.”

Outside, the night was very black, with the fog making a wide halo around the few electric lamps. The regular sound of the sea was becoming a roar and was much louder than during the day.

“May I ask you some more questions?”

She was wearing very high heels, and he was avoiding streets without pavements, particularly those with big, uneven cobblestones where she would twist her ankle.

“That’s why I’m here. You’ll have to ask them some time or other, won’t you? I should like to return to Paris tomorrow with an easy mind.”

Since his youth, Maigret had rarely been for a stroll like this of an evening, in the dark, cold streets of a small town, with a pretty woman for company, and he almost felt guilty. Very few people passed them. Their steps could be heard long before their silhouettes could be distinguished, and most of them turned round to look at the couple out so late at night; perhaps they were also being watched from behind the curtains in the lighted windows.

“Sunday was your mother’s birthday, I believe.”

“Yes, the 3rd of September. My step-father had turned that day into something as important as a Bank Holiday and refused to allow any of the family to be absent. We’ve kept up this practice of all coming to see my mother. It’s become a tradition, you see?”

“Except for Théo, according to what you told me a while ago.”

“Except for Théo, since the death of his father.”

“Did you bring her presents? May I know what?”

“By an odd coincidence Mimi and I brought her almost the same thing: a lace collar. It’s difficult to give my mother a present, as she’s had everything she could want, expensive things, rare things. If she’s given a knick-knack she bursts into laughter, laughter which hurts, and then thanks you with exaggerated effusiveness. She’s mad about lace, so we both thought of it.”

“No chocolates, sweets, titbits?”

“I can guess what you’re thinking. No. Nobody would think of giving her chocolates or sweets, she hates them. You see, Mother’s the sort of woman who looks fragile and delicate, but prefers a grilled herring or a kipper, a jar of gherkins or a nice piece of salted bacon to any sort of sweetmeats.”

“And you?”

“No.”

“Has anybody else in the family ever suspected what happened once between you and your stepfather?”

“Frankly, I’m not certain, but I could swear Mother always knew about it.”

“Who would have told her?”

“Nobody need have. Forgive me if I seem to be running her down again, but she’s always listened outside doors. It was a mania with her. She spied on me before she spied on Ferdinand. She used to spy on everybody who lived in the house, in *her* house, including the butler, the chauffeur and the maids.”

“Why?”

“To know everything. Because it was *her home*.”

“And you think she knew about Théo, too?”

“I’m almost certain.”

“She never said anything to you about it, made no allusions? You were under twenty, weren’t you? She could have kept you in check.”

“For what reason?”

“When you announced your intention of marrying Julien Sudre, didn’t she try to dissuade you? At that time, surely, it could have been considered a bad marriage. Ferdinand Besson was at the height of his glory. You were surrounded by luxury and you suddenly married a dentist, with no money and no prospects.”

“Mother didn’t say anything.”

“And your step-father?”

“He didn’t dare. He was in an embarrassing position as far as I was concerned. I think his conscience was troubling him. At heart, I believe he was a very honest and even a scrupulous man. He must have been convinced that I was only doing it because of him. He wanted to give me a large dowry, but Julien refused it.”

“On your advice?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother never suspected anything?”

“No.”

They were now on a path which was climbing the cliff; at regular intervals they saw the Antifer lighthouse searching the sky, and somewhere could be heard the mournful sound of the fog-siren. A strong smell of seaweed came up to them. In spite of her high heels and her Paris clothes, Arlette was showing no sign of fatigue, didn't complain of the cold.

“I shall go onto another, more personal question.”

“I can predict almost all the questions you'll ask me.”

“When did you learn that you could not have children? Before you were married?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Have you forgotten what I told you just now?”

“I haven't forgotten, but...”

“No, I didn't take any sort of precaution and I didn't allow the men to use them.”

“Why not?”

“I don't know. From a sort of cleanliness perhaps.”

He thought he saw her blush in the darkness, and there had been a difference in the sound of her voice.

“How did you find out for certain?”

“From a young doctor, a resident at Lariboisière.”

“Was he your lover?”

“Like the rest. He examined me and had me examined by his friends.”

He hesitated, embarrassed by the question which came to mind. She noticed it.

“Say it! Now I've gone this far...”

“This gathering with his friends, was it all on a strictly medical basis or was it rather...”

“*Or rather, yes!*”

“Now I understand.”

“That I felt like putting an end to all that, you mean?”

She was still speaking in the same composed manner, in an even voice, as if it was a pathological case, rather than herself, they were discussing.

“Ask me the other question.”

“All right, I will. During these... these amorous experiences, or later on with your husband or with any of the others, did you ever feel any...”

“... enjoyment? Is that what you mean?”

“I was going to use the word satisfaction.”

“Neither. You see, you’re not the first person to ask me that question. If I sometimes just follow anybody in the street, I do also sleep with educated people, and even with people, with men of high intelligence...”

“Is Hervé Peyrot one of them?”

“He’s a conceited fool.”

“What would be your reaction if your mother suddenly told you that she knew all about that side of your life?”

“I’d tell her to mind her own business.”

“Let’s imagine that, in the hope of saving you, she thought it her duty to tell you she would go and speak to your husband?”

Silence. She had stopped walking.

“Is that what you’ve been getting at?” she said with a reproach in her voice.

“I’ve got there without intending to.”

“I don’t know. I told you I wouldn’t want Julien to know for anything in the world.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you understand?”

“Because you’re afraid of hurting him?”

“That’s part of it. Julien is happy. He’s one of the happiest people I know. Nobody’s got the right to take away his happiness. Also...”

“Also...?”

“He’s probably the only man who has any respect for me, who treats me as anything but... You know what I mean.”

“And you need that?”

“Perhaps.”

“So much so, that if your mother...”

“If she threatened to make me look dirty in his eyes, I would do anything to stop her.”

“Including murder?”

“Yes.”

She added:

“I can assure you that the circumstance has not yet arisen.”

“Why do you say *not yet*?”

“Because now she not only knows, but she has proof of it. She spoke to me about Hervé this afternoon.”

“What did she say?”

“You’d probably be very surprised if I repeated the words she used. You must realize that my mother, for all her air of being a little marquise, is still very much of the people, very much the daughter of a fisherman, and in private she can sometimes be foul-mouthed. She told me I might have been content to do my whoring away from her house, and she added some more filthy words to describe what happened between Hervé and me. She spoke about Julien just as rudely, calling him a pimp, because she’s convinced he knows about it and profits from it...”

“Did you defend him?”

“I made my mother keep quiet.”

“How?”

“By looking into her eyes and telling her I *wished* she would keep quiet. When she went on, I slapped her and she was so taken aback she quietened down immediately.”

“Is she waiting for you?”

“She certainly won’t go to bed before I’m back.”

“You really intend to sleep there?”

“You know the situation, and you must admit that it would be difficult for me not to. Before I leave I must be sure that she won’t say anything to Julien, that she won’t do anything to distress him.”

After a silence, perhaps guessing that Maigret was worried, she gave a slight dry laugh.

“Don’t be afraid, there won’t be any trouble!”

They had come to the top of the cliff, and there was a milky mass of fog between them and the sea, which could be heard hammering against the rocks.

“We can turn right to get down again. The path is better and it brings us out almost opposite La Bicoque. Are you sure you have no more questions to ask me?”

The moon must have risen behind the mist, which was now glowing faintly, and when Arlette stopped, he saw the white shape of her face and the blood-red gash of her mouth.

“Not at the moment,” he replied.

Then, still standing motionless in front of him, she added, in a different voice, which was unpleasant to hear:

“And... don’t you want to make the most of me, like the others?”

He almost did what she had done that very day to her mother, slapped her, for being a naughty girl. He merely gripped her arm tightly with his fingers and forced her to go on down the hill.

“All I’ve just been saying was meant for you, you know.”

“Be quiet!”

“You are tempted, aren’t you?”

He squeezed her arm harder, brutally.

“Are you sure you won’t regret it afterwards?”

Her voice was a note higher, had become cruel and sarcastic.

“Think carefully, Inspector.”

He let go of her abruptly, filled his pipe as he walked along, forgetting about her. He heard her stop again, then slowly move on, and finally walk quickly down to join him.

At that moment Maigret’s face was lit up by the glow of the match he held above the bowl of his pipe.

“Please forgive me. I behaved like an idiot.”

“You did.”

“Are you very cross with me?”

“Let’s not talk any more about it.”

“Do you really think I wanted to?”

“No.”

“What I did want to do, after being forced to humiliate myself like that, was to hurt you in turn, to humiliate you.”

“I know.”

“I should have had my revenge, if I’d seen you lying on me like an animal.”

“Come on.”

“Admit that you think I tried to kill my mother.”

“Not yet.”

“You mean you’re not sure yet?”

“I mean quite simply what the words mean, that I don’t know anything.”

“When you think I’m guilty, will you tell me?”

“Probably.”

“You’ll tell me privately?”

“I promise you.”

“But I’m not guilty.”

“I hope not.”

He had had enough of the conversation, which had already gone on too long. Arlette’s persistence was annoying him. He thought she was too eager to analyse and dirty herself.

“Mother’s still up.”

“How do you know?”

“That little light you can see comes from her sitting-room.”

“What time is your train tomorrow?”

“I’d like to catch the one at eight o’clock in the morning. That is if you don’t keep me here. In that case I’ll telephone Julien and tell him Mother needs me.”

“Does he know you hate your mother?”

“I don’t hate her. I don’t love her, and that’s all there is to it. Can I catch the eight o’clock train?”

“Yes.”

“I shan’t see you again before I go?”

“I still don’t know at all.”

“Perhaps you’d like to make sure that Mother’s still alive before I leave?”

“Perhaps.”

They had just come down a steeper slope, a sort of bank, and they were now on the road, fifty yards from the gate of La Bicoque.

“You won’t come in?”

“No.”

The windows were out of sight, though he could just glimpse the light from them behind the thick screen of bushes.

“Good-night, Monsieur Maigret!”

“Good-night!”

She was hesitating to leave him.

“Are you still angry with me?”

“I don’t know. Go and get some sleep!”

And stuffing his hands in his pockets, he strode off quickly in the direction of the town.

Confused thoughts were running through his head, and now that he had left her, he thought of a hundred questions he would have liked to ask her. He regretted giving her permission to leave the next morning and was on the point of retracing his steps to tell her to stay.

Wasn’t he mistaken, also, to leave the two women alone together for the night? Wouldn’t the afternoon’s scene be repeated with fresh acrimony, with more dangerous violence?

He would be delighted to see Valentine again, to talk to her, to be seated once more in that tiny sitting-room, amongst its artless knick-knacks.

At nine o’clock he would meet that noisy Charles Besson, who would burst his ear-drums.

The town was dead and the lights in the casino had already been put out for lack of customers. At a street corner there was only one bar still lit up, really a bistro, which would probably remain open during the winter for the local inhabitants.

Maigret paused for a moment on the pavement because he was feeling thirsty. In the yellowish light inside he recognized a silhouette which was becoming familiar to him, that of Théo Besson, still looking very English in a tweed suit.

He was holding a glass in his hand and speaking to somebody standing beside him, a youngish man in a black suit, the sort of suit peasants wear on Sundays, with a white

shirt and a dark tie, a youth with a highly coloured face and a sunburnt neck.

Maigret turned the handle of the door, walked to the bar without looking at them and asked for a beer.

He could now see them both in a mirror behind the bottles, and he thought he noticed Théo give his companion a look to stop him talking.

The sudden silence which resulted was noticeable in the bar, as there were only four people in it, including the *patron*, plus a black cat curled up asleep on a chair in front of the stove.

“There’s more fog about,” the bar-keeper said at last. “It’s what you expect this time of year. But it’s not any less sunny during the day.”

The young man turned around to stare at Maigret, who was knocking his pipe against his heel to empty it and grinding the hot ashes into the sawdust. There was an arrogant look about him, and he reminded one of a village lout who had had a little too much to drink on the evening of a wedding or a funeral, and was trying to start a fight.

“You’re not the one who came from Paris this morning?” the *patron* asked, making conversation. Maigret merely nodded his head, and the young spiv looked at him even more closely.

This went on for a few minutes while Théo Besson merely looked casually at the bottles in front of him. His complexion and his eyes, especially the bags under his eyes, were those of a man who drinks a lot, regularly, from first thing in the morning. He also had that apathetic expression and slightly unsteady walk.

“The same again!” he ordered.

The *patron* looked at the young man, who made a sign of assent. So they were together.

Théo emptied his glass in one gulp. The other followed his example, and when the elder of the Bessons had thrown some notes on the counter, they went out together, not without the youth turning round twice to look at the chief-inspector.

“Who’s that?”

“Don’t you know him? It’s Monsieur Théo, Valentine’s step-son.”

“And the young one?”

“One of the brothers of La Rose, the poor girl who died because she drank that poison intended for her mistress.”

“The eldest brother?”

“Yes. Henri, from the herring fleet at Fécamp.”

“Did they come in here together?”

“I think so. Let’s see. At that time there were several people in the bar. In any case, if they didn’t come in together, they came in soon after each other.”

“You don’t know what they were talking about?”

“No. Earlier on it was very noisy, a lot of people talking at once. Then I went downstairs to tap a barrel.”

“Have you ever seen them together before?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not sure of that. But what I did see was Monsieur Théo with the young girl.”

“Which girl?”

“La Rose.”

“You saw them in the street?”

“I saw them here at my bar, at least twice.”

“Was he courting her?”

“It depends what you mean by courting. They didn’t kiss and he didn’t lay his hands on her, if that’s what you mean. But they were chatting happily, they were laughing and I could tell he was trying to get her tight. It wasn’t difficult with La Rose, she used to giggle after the first glass and was tipsy after the second.”

“How often did this happen?”

“Let’s see. The last time was about a week ago. Well, it must have been Wednesday, because it was the day my wife

went to Le Havre, and she goes every Wednesday.”

“And the first time?”

“Perhaps a week or two before that.”

“Is Monsieur Théo a good customer?”

“He’s not only my customer. He’s the customer of anybody who sells drink. He’s got nothing to do all day, and he goes for walks. But he can’t see a café or a bar open without coming in for a moment. He’s never noisy. He never makes a nuisance of himself. Sometimes, in the evening, his voice becomes thick and he can’t say one or two words properly, but that’s all.”

The *patron* suddenly looked as if he regretted having said too much.

“I hope you don’t suspect him of wanting to poison his step-mother? If there’s one person in the world I’d trust, it’s that one. In any case, people who drink like him are never dangerous. The worst types are the ones who get drunk once in a while and then don’t know what they’re doing any more.”

“Have you seen La Rose’s brother often?”

“Very rarely. The Yport people don’t like coming to Étretat. They keep to themselves. It’s easier for them to go to Fécamp, which is closer and more their kind of place. A drop of calvados to help the beer go down? This one’s on me.”

“No. Another beer.”

The beer was not good and it lay heavily on Maigret’s stomach during the night; he woke up several times with a start, had distressing dreams, which he could not remember at all, but which left him with a feeling of disaster. When he finally got up, the fog-siren was still sending its hoarse calls from out at sea, and it must have been high tide, for the hotel was trembling with each battering of the waves.

Already there was almost no fog to hide the sun from the land, but the sea, very calm, hardly disturbed by a gentle swell, was still steaming, and rainbows were shining in the watery mist.

As for the houses in the town, they were beginning to be gilded in the sunrise, and the air was fresh, a delicious freshness that one could breathe in through every pore. The greengrocers' stalls smelt good, bottles of milk were still waiting on doorsteps, and in the bakers' shops it was a warm and crusty time.

Once again it conjured up a childhood memory, a picture of the world as one would like it to be, as one would willingly imagine it. Étretat appeared innocent and guileless with its little houses too small, too pretty, too freshly painted for tragedy, and the cliffs emerging from the mist just as on the postcards hanging on the door of the store; the butcher, the baker, the greengrocer could have all been characters in a children's story.

Was Maigret the only person to have these fantasies? Or did others, equally nostalgic, just refuse to admit it? He would have so liked the world to be as one discovers it when one is small. At the back of his mind he was saying: "Just like picture-books."

And not only the exterior scene, but the people, the father and mother, the well-behaved children, the kind grandparents with their white hair...

For quite a while, after he had just joined the Police Force, Le Vesinet, for example, had seemed to him to be the most beautiful place in the world. It was only a step from Paris, but before 1914 motor-cars were rare. The rich people still had their country houses at Le Vésinet; brick houses, spacious and comfortable, with well-kept gardens adorned with fountains, swings and big silver balls. The valets used to wear striped yellow waistcoats, and the maids white bonnets and aprons trimmed with lace.

It seemed that only happy and virtuous families, for whom everything was quietness and joy, could have lived there, and he had been secretly disappointed when an unsavoury business had broken out in one of those villas with newly raked drives—the sordid murder of somebody’s mother-in-law for her money.

Now, sure enough, he knew. In a way he spent his life seeing behind the scenes, but he still had a child’s regret for the world “in the picture”.

The little station was pretty, painted in water-colours by a good pupil, with a little cloud still pink, almost directly above its chimney. There was the toy train again, the man who punched the tickets—as a boy, he had dreamed of punching railway tickets one day—and he saw Arlette arrive, as fragile and elegant in her Parisian dress as on the day before, carrying in her hand a crocodile-skin travelling-bag.

A while ago, he had almost set off to meet her along the dusty road where the hedges and rank weeds must have had a wonderful smell, but he had been afraid of seeming too anxious to meet her. Coming down that path, with little steps, perched on her high heels, she must have looked just like the “young lady from the château”.

Why is reality always so different? Or rather, why do people put into children’s heads the illusion of a world which doesn’t exist, an illusion they will compare with reality all their lives?

She saw him at once, waiting for her on the platform, near the paper kiosk, and she smiled at him as she gave her ticket to the man, a slightly weary smile. She seemed tired. There was a certain anxiety in her look.

“I thought you would be here,” she said.

“How did it go off?”

“It was rather painful.”

She was looking for a compartment, as the carriages had no corridors. There was only one first-class compartment where she could be alone.

“Your mother?”

“She’s alive. At any rate she was when I left.”

They only had a few minutes before the train went, and once her case had been placed on the seat, she stood by the step.

“Did you have another argument?”

“We didn’t get to bed until half-way through the night. I must tell you something, Monsieur Maigret. It’s only an impression, but it worries me. Rose is dead, but I’ve got the feeling that it’s not finished, that some other tragedy is brewing.”

“From what your mother said?”

“No. I don’t know why.”

“Do you think she’s still in danger?”

She didn’t reply. Her bright eyes were looking in the direction of the kiosk.

“The inspector’s over there, waiting for you,” she remarked, as if the spell had been broken.

And she got into her compartment just as the station-master put the whistle to his mouth and the engine started spitting out steam.

Castaing was there, sure enough. He had arrived earlier than he had said the day before, and when he had not been able to find Maigret at the hotel, had thought of looking for him at the station. It was rather a nuisance. Why was it really a nuisance?

The train was leaving, quite slowly, then stopping with a great shudder after a few yards, just as Maigret was shaking hands with the inspector.

“Anything new?”

“Nothing special,” Castaing replied. “But I was worried, for no real reason. I dreamed of the two women, the mother and daughter, alone in the little house.”

“Which was the murderer?”

It was Castaing’s turn to be confused.

“How do you know? I dreamed the mother killed the daughter. And guess what she did it with. With a log from the fireplace!”

“Charles Besson is supposed to be here at nine o’clock. His mother-in-law has died. Lucas hasn’t telephoned any more information to you?”

“Not much, but he’ll call the office again when he has more, and I’ve told them to get in touch with us at your hotel.”

“Nothing about Théo?”

“He’s had a lot of trouble with dishonoured cheques. He’s always been able to pay before being had up. Most of his friends are rich. They’re the sort of people who lead a gay life and like having a crowd around them. From time to time he makes a little on the side, usually acting as a middle-man in some deal or other.”

“No women?”

“He doesn’t seem too keen on women. He sometimes has a girlfriend, but never for long.”

“Is that all?”

There was such a good smell of coffee and spirits coming from a little bar that neither of them could resist going in and leaning on their elbows in front of large cups, which gave off a fragrant smell of alcohol.

“It’s not so much my dream which upset me,” continued the inspector quietly, “as something I figured out before I went to sleep. I even told my wife about it, because I can think better aloud, and she agreed with me. It’s five years since old Ferdinand Besson died, isn’t it?”

“Just about.”

“And since then, as far as we know, the situation has remained the same. Well, it was only last Sunday that somebody tried to poison Valentine. Note that they chose the only day when there were enough people in the house to divide suspicion.”

“That’s all right. And then?”

“It’s not Valentine who’s dead, but poor Rose. So if there was a reason for wanting to get rid of Valentine, that reason still holds good. So, as long as we don’t know what the motive was...”

“The danger’s always there, is that what you mean?”

“Yes. Perhaps the danger is more serious than ever, precisely because you are here. Valentine hasn’t got any money. So it wasn’t for that reason that somebody tried to murder her. Couldn’t it be because she knows something that mustn’t be disclosed? In that case...”

Maigret was listening to this reasoning without seeming to be very enthralled. He was looking out at the morning sunshine, particularly lovely with the night’s dampness still making the sun’s rays seem to shimmer.

“Lucas didn’t say anything about Julien?”

“The Sudres live very modestly in a block of flats at low rents. A five-roomed flat. They’ve got a maid and a car, and go to the country for week-ends.”

“I knew that.”

“Hervé Peyrot, the wine merchant, is rich. He has a big business in the Quai de Bercy and wastes most of his time with women, all sorts of women; he has three cars, one of them a Bugatti.”

“Family Beach”, he had read that somewhere in a prospectus. And it was true. Mothers with their children, husbands coming to join them on Saturday evening; old ladies and gentlemen who had their bottle of mineral water and their box of pills on their table at the hotel and who were always in the same chairs at the casino; the Seuret sisters’ pastry shop, where one went and ate cakes and ice-creams; the old fishermen, always the same ones, being photographed beside boats pulled up on the shingle...

Ferdinand Besson, also, had been one of those respectable old gentlemen, and Valentine was the most adorable of old ladies; Arlette, this morning, could have been a model for a postcard, her husband was a nice little dentist, and Théo was

just the sort of man who could be forgiven for drinking a little too much, because he was so quiet and so distinguished.

Charles Besson was now arriving in his turn ; he had a wife and four children, one a baby only a few months old, and while his mourning clothes were being made, he would have a black band sewn round his sleeve, because his mother-in-law had died.

He was a Deputy, already on familiar terms with the Minister. During his electoral campaign he probably shook hands warmly, kissed all the brats, took a glass of wine with the fishermen and the peasants.

He was also what is called a fine figure of a man—what, for example, Maigret's mother would have called a fine figure of a man—tall and broadshouldered, rather fat, pot-bellied, with almost naïve eyes and a fleshy lip underneath his moustache.

“I haven't kept you waiting, Chief-Inspector? Good-morning, Castaing. Glad to meet you again.”

His car had recently been repainted.

“Not any bad news, I hope?”

“Not a thing.”

“My step-mother?”

“She seems to be all right. Arlette has just left.”

“Ah! So she came back? That was nice of her. I thought she would come and comfort her mother.”

“Will you excuse us a moment, Monsieur Besson?”

And Maigret took Castaing aside, sending him off to Yport and then to Fécamp.

“I'm sorry. I had some instructions to give him. I must say I don't exactly know where we can go. They won't have done my room yet.”

“I'd quite like a drink. After that, if the fresh air doesn't put you off, we could go and sit on the casino terrace. I hope you weren't too annoyed that I wasn't here to greet you? My wife is in a bad state. Her sister has just come from Marseilles,

she's the wife of a ship-owner there. They are the only children. The Montets didn't have a son, and I'm the one who has to put up with all the complications."

"Do you expect complications?"

"I've nothing to say against my mother-in-law. She was a worthy woman, but, and specially towards the end, she had some peculiar ideas. Has anybody told you that her husband was a building contractor? He built half the houses in Dieppe and numerous public buildings. The bulk of the fortune he left is tied up in real estate. My mother-in-law looked after it all personally after his death. But she always refused to do any repairs. So there are an incredible number of court-cases with the tenants, the town council and even the tax authorities."

"One question, Monsieur Besson. Used your mother-in-law and Valentine to see each other?"

Maigret was drinking a second café-cognac as he watched his companion, who, at closer quarters, looked even flabbier, even less solid.

"Unfortunately, no. They never agreed to meet."

"Neither of them?"

"It was actually my wife's mother who refused to see Valentine. It's a ridiculous story. When I introduced Mimi to her, Valentine looked at her hands closely, and then said something like:

" 'You obviously haven't got your father's hands.'

" 'Why?'

" 'Because I imagine a mason's hands would be bigger and broader than these.'

"You see how silly it is? My father-in-law did start off as a mason, but he only remained one for a very short time. But he was always a little foul-mouthed. I think he used to do it on purpose, because he was very rich; he had become an important person in Dieppe and the surrounding district, and he enjoyed shocking people by the way he dressed and his bad language.

“When my mother-in-law heard about that she was on her mettle.

“ ‘It’s certainly better than being the daughter of a fisherman who drank himself to death in all the bistros!’

“Then she spoke about the time when Valentine was an assistant in the Seurets’ pastry shop.”

“Accusing her of not having led an exemplary life?”

“Yes. She stressed the difference in age between her and her husband. Anyway, the long and the short of it is that they’ve always refused to meet.”

Shrugging his shoulders, he added :

“All families have stories like this, don’t they? It doesn’t prevent both of them being good women in their own ways.”

“Are you very fond of Valentine?”

“Very much so. She’s always been extremely good to me.”

“And your wife?”

“Mimi naturally doesn’t appreciate her so much.”

“Do they quarrel?”

“They seldom see each other, once a year on the average. Before she goes to see her, I always warn Mimi to be patient, reminding her that Valentine is getting old. She promises, but there are always some sharp words.”

“Last Sunday as well?”

“I don’t know. I went out for a walk with the children.”

And what did the children think of their father? Probably, like most children, that he was a strong, intelligent man, capable of guiding and protecting them through life. They could not see that he was a weakling, ill-adjusted to reality.

Mimi would probably say:

“He’s so good!”

Because he liked everybody, naïvely watching life roll by with his large, greedy eyes. After all, he would so much have

liked to be strong, to be intelligent, to be the best man in the world!

And he had his ideas, he was full of ideas. If he didn't realize all of them, and if the ones he did realize generally ended in a fiasco, it was because circumstances were against him.

But hadn't he succeeded in becoming a Deputy? Now they would recognize his real worth. The whole country would hear about him, make him a Minister, a great statesman.

"When you were young, were you never in love with Valentine? She was barely ten years older than you."

He looked offended, indignant.

"Never in my life!"

"And afterwards, you weren't in love with Arlette?"

"I've always looked on her as a sister."

This man was still seeing the world and the human race as in a picture. He was taking a cigar from his pocket, surprised that Maigret would not smoke with him, lighting it with elaborate care, and drawing in the smoke slowly, then watching it rise up into the golden air.

"Shall we go and sit on the terrace? There are some comfortable chairs facing the beach. We'll be able to see the sea."

He lived all the year round at the seaside but always found the same delight in looking at it from a comfortable chair, well-dressed, well-shaven, with all the appearance of a prosperous, important man.

"And your brother Théo?"

"Are you asking whether he was in love with Valentine?"

"Yes."

"Certainly not. I never noticed anything of the kind."

"Or with Arlette?"

“Even less so. I was still only a lad when Théo was already having some fun, especially with the sort I call ‘fast women’.”

“Arlette wasn’t in love with him either?”

“Perhaps she had a ‘crush’ on him, as my wife says about young girls’ love affairs. You know how it is. It doesn’t mean anything. The proof of that is that she wasn’t long getting married.”

“You weren’t surprised at that?”

“At what?”

“At her marrying Julien Sudre.”

“No. Perhaps just a little, because he had no money and we always thought that Arlette wouldn’t be able to exist without luxury. There was a time when she was quite a snob. She got over that. I think that with Julien it was the real thing. He was very charming. My father wanted to give her a large dowry, because at that time we were very rich, but he refused it.”

“Did she also?”

“Yes. Consequently, she had to get used overnight to living in a modest way. We were forced to do the same, but that was later.”

“Your wife and Arlette get on all right?”

“I think so. Even though they’re very different. Mimi has children and a home to look after. She seldom goes out.”

“Wouldn’t she like to go out more? She’s never wished you lived in Paris?”

“She hates Paris.”

“And she’s never homesick for Dieppe?”

“A little perhaps. Unfortunately, now that I’m a Deputy, we can’t go there to live. My constituents wouldn’t understand it.”

Charles Besson’s words were in perfect harmony with the setting, the sea a postcard blue, the cliffs starting to glitter, the holiday-makers coming to sit down, one after another, as if for a photograph.

Did any of this, in truth, really exist, or was it only make-believe? Could it be that this fat self-satisfied fellow was right?

Was La Rose dead or not?

“You weren’t surprised to find your brother here on Sunday?”

“A little, at first. I thought he was at Deauville, or rather, since it’s the beginning of September and the shooting season’s started, in some château in Sologne. Théo, you know, has remained a man of the world. When he still had money he used to live in grand style and treated his friends generously. They remember this now and give him hospitality in their turn.”

At once things were taking on a different aspect! A few words, and they were no longer talking about the same Théo.

“Has he any means?”

“Financial? I don’t know. Very little, if any. But he hasn’t many expenses. He’s a bachelor.”

Nevertheless there was a note of envy in the voice of this big man, tied down by his four kids.

“He’s still very elegant, but it’s because he looks after his clothes. He gets frequent invitations into high society. I think he occasionally does a little business. You know he’s a very intelligent fellow, and if he had wanted...”

Charles too, probably, if he had wanted...

“He agreed straight away to go with you to Valentine’s?”

“Not immediately.”

“Did he tell you why he was here?”

“I do hope, Inspector, you don’t suspect Théo?”

“I don’t suspect anybody, Monsieur Besson. We are only having a chat. I’m trying to get as clear a picture of the family as possible.”

“Very well! If you want my opinion, Théo, although he wouldn’t admit to it, is a sentimentalist. He was homesick for Étretat, where we used to spend our holidays when we were children. Do you know that we used to come here even when my mother was alive?”

“I see.”

“I made him realize there was no reason to remain on bad terms with Valentine and that she no longer bore him any grudge. He finally came with me.”

“How did he behave?”

“Like a gentleman. A little embarrassed to start with. When he saw our presents he apologized for coming empty-handed.”

“And towards Arlette?”

“What? There was never anything between him and Arlette.”

“So the whole family was there for dinner?”

“Except for Sudre, who wasn’t able to come.”

“I was forgetting. And you didn’t notice anything, any little detail which might have given a hint of tragedy.”

“Absolutely nothing. And I’m naturally an observant person.”

What a half-wit! But how lucky to be a half-wit sometimes!

“I should point out that Mimi and I were very taken up with the children. At home they’re relatively quiet. If you’re unfortunate enough to take them out, they get on your nerves. You’ve seen that Valentine’s house is tiny. The dining-room was so crowded we could hardly move. The baby, who usually sleeps most of the time, made up for it by crying for nearly an hour, and that was deafening us. We had to put the little boy to bed in my step-mother’s bedroom, and we didn’t know what to do to amuse the older children.”

“You knew La Rose well?”

“I saw her every time I went to La Bicoque. She looked a good girl, a bit reserved, like a lot of people around here. But

when you get to know them...”

“Then you must have seen her half a dozen times altogether?”

“Rather more.”

“Did you have any conversation with her?”

“As one does with servants, about the weather, the food. She was a good cook. I wonder how Valentine’s going to manage now, as she’s fond of her food. Look here, Inspector, all the time I’ve been listening to you and answering your questions, I’ve been a little afraid you’re on the wrong track.”

Maigret showed no reaction, continued to draw quietly on his pipe, looking at a minute ship which was moving indiscernibly across the curve of the horizon.

“Besides, it’s because I foresaw this, I mean because I foresaw the way the police would direct their investigations, that I went to the Minister and asked him if he would do me the favour of having you in charge of the case.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Not at all! I should be thanking you for coming. Although I have always been a very busy man, I have, like everybody else, occasionally read detective stories.

“There’s no point in asking if you take them seriously. In detective stories everybody has something to hide, everybody has a more or less troubled conscience, and it turns out that the most apparently straightforward people really lead complicated lives.

“Now that you’ve got to know the family a little, I’d like to think you realize none of us has any grounds for wanting to harm my stepmother, let alone for planning to kill her in cold blood.

“They’ve found arsenic in La Rose’s stomach, and it seems positive, if I’ve understood correctly, that it was in the glass of medicine intended for Valentine.

“I’m not disputing the conclusion reached by the experts, who ought to know what they’re about, though they’ve been

known to make mistakes, and even to disagree among themselves.

“You’ve met Arlette. You’ve seen Théo. You see me here. As for Mimi, had it not been for the unhappiness which has just befallen her, I’d have brought her along to see you, and you’d have realized she wouldn’t do anybody any harm.

“We were all happy on Sunday. And I maintain, even at the risk of being laughed at, that only an accident can have caused the catastrophe.

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

He was delighted with his final shot, which he put with a shrewd smile, as he would have put a poser to an opponent in the Chambre des Députés.

“I don’t believe in them.”

“Neither do I. Nevertheless, every year, somewhere in France, they discover a haunted house, and for several days, sometimes several weeks, the inhabitants are in a great state of excitement. I’ve known, in a place in my constituency, a veritable mobilization of police and detectives, along with specialists, who could find no explanation for the way certain pieces of furniture were shifting about, night after night. Yet invariably, one fine day, it is all explained, usually so simply that the whole business ends in a burst of laughter.”

“Rose is dead, isn’t she?”

“I know. I’m not going so far as to maintain she may have poisoned herself.”

“Dr. Jolly, who always looked after her, says that she was perfectly healthy both in mind and body. Nothing about her life or her behaviour allows one to suppose that she wanted to kill herself. Don’t forget the poison was in the glass when Valentine was about to take her medicine, since she found it too bitter and didn’t drink it.”

“All right. I’m not suggesting anything. I only say this : none of the people present had anything to gain by getting rid of a harmless old woman.”

“Do you know there was a man in the house during the night?”

He blushed a little, made a movement as if to brush away a troublesome fly.

“I heard about it. I found it difficult to believe. But after all Arlette is thirty-eight. She’s remarkably attractive and she’s subjected to more temptations than others. Perhaps it’s less serious than we think? In any case I hope Julien never hears about it.”

“It’s not likely.”

“Look here, Monsieur Maigret, to suspect the people on the spot is what just anybody would have done. But you, from what I know, you will go right to the bottom of the matter; you will look beyond the obvious, and I’m quite sure that, as with the ghosts, you’ll find a very simple solution.”

“That Rose is not dead, for example?”

Charles Besson laughed, not altogether certain, however, whether it was meant as a joke.

“And for a start, how was the arsenic obtained? In what form?”

“Don’t forget that your father was a chemist, that Théo, according to what I’ve been told, studied chemistry, that you yourself at one time worked in the laboratory, that every member of the family, in fact, has some knowledge of chemistry.”

“I’ve never thought about that, but it doesn’t alter my argument.*

“Obviously.”

“Nor does it prove that someone didn’t come in from outside.”

“A tramp, for example?”

“Why not?”

“Someone who waited until the house was crowded before getting in through a window on the first floor and pouring

poison into a glass? For that's also an important aspect of the question. The poison wasn't put in the bottle of sleeping-draught, they didn't find a trace of it there, only in the glass."

"You can see yourself that it's very confused!"

"La Rose is dead."

"Then what do you think? Tell me your opinion, man to man. Of course I promise not to do anything about it, not to repeat anything which might hinder your investigations. Who?"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

"I've no more idea."

"How?"

"We'll learn that when I've answered the first two questions."

"You have your suspicions?"

He was ill at ease now, sitting in his chair, chewing at the end of his burnt-out cigar, which probably made a bitter taste in his mouth. Perhaps, as had happened with Maigret, he was clinging to his illusions, to the picture of life he had invented for himself, and it was now being destroyed. It was almost pathetic to see him, worried, upset, watching for the least sign from the chief-inspector.

"There has been a murder," said the latter.

"That seems undeniable."

"There can't be a murder without a reason, particularly not one by poison, which is incompatible with an impulse of anger or passion. Throughout my career, I haven't come across one case of poisoning that was without a motive."

"But who the devil could have had a motive?"

He was finally losing his temper.

"I haven't found that out."

“All my step-mother possesses is an annuity, apart from a few pieces of furniture and some odds and ends.”

“I know.”

“I don’t need any money, particularly not at the moment. Neither does Arlette. Théo has no worries about it.”

“I’ve been told all that.”

“Well?”

“Well nothing. I’m only just beginning my investigations, Monsieur Besson. You asked me to come and here I am. Valentine also asked me to handle the case.”

“She wrote to you?”

“Neither wrote nor telephoned. She came to Paris to see me.”

“I knew she’d gone to Paris, but I thought it was to see her daughter.”

“She came to Police Headquarters and was actually in my office when I got the message from the Minister.”

“That’s odd.”

“Why?”

“Because I wouldn’t have thought she had heard of you.”

“She told me she followed most of my cases in the papers and that she’d cut out certain articles. What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing.”

“You prefer to remain silent?”

“It’s nothing definite, I can assure you, only that I’ve never seen my step-mother read a paper. She doesn’t subscribe to any, has always refused to have a wireless and doesn’t even have a telephone. She has no interest whatsoever in what goes on in the world.”

“You see how one can always find out something new?”

“And what does this lead to?”

“We shall know that later. Perhaps nothing. You aren’t thirsty?”

“Is Théo still at Étretat?”

“I saw him again yesterday evening.”

“In that case we might meet him in the bar. Have you spoken to him?”

“I haven’t had the opportunity.”

“I’ll introduce you.”

It was obvious that he was worried about something, and this time he just bit off the end of his cigar and lit it carelessly.

Some boys and girls were playing with an enormous red rubber ball in the waves...

VI

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Besson was right. Besides Charlie, who was still polishing up, there was only one other person in the bar: it was Théo, who, failing company, was playing poker dice by himself.

Charles moved towards him, happy and proud to be introducing his elder brother, who watched them coming with expressionless eyes and reluctantly got down from his stool.

“Do you know Chief-Inspector Maigret?”

Théo might have said, “Only by name,” or “Like everybody else,” something to indicate that Maigret was not just anybody, but he merely bowed slightly, in a very formal manner, without holding out his hand, and murmured:

“I’m pleased to meet you.”

Seen closer, he looked older, because one could notice some fine wrinkles which looked like tiny cracks. He obviously spent a long time at the hairdresser’s every morning, having an elaborate treatment, probably facial massages, since he had the skin of a coquettish old lady.

“You probably know that, through my intervention and Valentine’s, who went to Paris specially, the chief-inspector has agreed to investigate the case?”

Charles was a little disappointed to see his brother receiving them with the polite coldness of a sovereign on tour.

“We aren’t disturbing you?”

“Not at all.”

“We’ve just spent an hour in the sun on the front, and we’re thirsty, Charlie!”

Charlie gave Maigret a friendly wink.

“What are you drinking, Théo?”

“Scotch.”

“I hate whisky. What will you have, Inspector? A picon-grenadine for me.”

Why did Maigret also decide to have one? He hadn’t drunk it for a long time, and for some mysterious reason it brought back the holiday atmosphere.

“Have you seen Valentine since Sunday?”

“No.”

Théo’s hands were large and well-kept, but pale, with red hairs on them, and a big signet ring. He wasn’t wearing a single article of clothing that could have been bought in an ordinary shop. You could see that he had adopted a style, once and for all. Somebody had impressed him, probably an English aristocrat, and he had studied his gestures, his bearing, his way of dressing, and even the expressions on his face. From time to time, nonchalantly, he would put his hand to his mouth, as if he were going to yawn, but didn’t yawn.

“Are you still staying long at Étretat?”

“I don’t know.”

Charles was none the less making an effort to put his brother in a better light, and was explaining to the chief-inspector:

“He’s a strange fellow. He never knows what he’ll be doing from one day to the next. Without giving any reason, just like that, on his way out of Fouquet’s or Maxim’s, he goes home to pack a bag and takes a plane for Cannes or Chamonix, London or Brussels. Don’t you, Théo?”

Then Maigret attacked directly:

“May I ask you a question, Monsieur Besson? When was your last meeting with Rose?”

Poor Charles looked at both of them, dumbfounded, opened his mouth as if to protest, and seemed to be expecting a violent denial from his elder brother.

But Théo did not deny it. He appeared bored, stared at the bottom of his glass for a moment before lifting his eyes towards the chief-inspector.

“Is it an exact date you desire?”

“As far as possible.”

“Charles will tell you that I never know the date and that I often make a mistake about the day of the week.”

“More than a week ago?”

“About a week.”

“Was it a Sunday?”

“No. If it were a case of giving evidence on oath I’d think more carefully, but at a rough guess I’d say it was last Wednesday or Thursday.”

“Did you meet her very often?”

“I don’t know exactly. Two or three times.”

“You met her at your step-mother’s?”

“You must have been told that I wasn’t on visiting terms with my step-mother. When I first met the girl I didn’t know where she was working.”

“Where was that?”

“At the Vaucottes fair.”

“So you run after housemaids?” joked Charles, to show that it was not a thing his brother made a habit of.

“I was watching the sack-race. She was next to me, and I don’t remember who spoke first, she or I. In any case she said something about village fairs being all the same, that it was stupid and that she would rather go home, and I was myself about to leave, I politely offered her a seat in my car.”

“Is that all?”

“The same again, Charlie!”

Charlie promptly refilled all three glasses, and Maigret didn’t bother to protest.

“She told me she read a lot, talked to me about what she was reading, books she couldn’t understand and which troubled her. Should I look on this as an interrogation, Chief-Inspector? I’m quite happy to submit quietly, mind you, but this place...”

“Look here, Théo!” Charles protested. “Do I have to remind you that it was *I* who asked Monsieur Maigret to come here?”

“You’re the first person I’ve met,” added the chief-inspector, “who appears to know something about this girl, at any rate the first one to speak to me about her.”

“What more do you wish to know?”

“What you thought of her.”

“A little peasant girl, who’d read too much and used to ask ludicrous questions.”

“About what?”

“About everything, goodness, egoism, human relationships, intelligence—need I go on?”

“About love?”

“She told me she didn’t believe in it and that she’d never condescend to give herself to a man.”

“Even after she got married?”

“She considered marriage a very dirty thing, to use her own expression.”

“So there was nothing between you?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“No familiarities?”

“She used to hold my hand when we were walking, or if we went for a drive in the car, she would lean against my shoulder a little.”

“Did she ever talk to you about hatred?”

“No. Her favourites were egoism and pride, which she would discuss in a strong Norman accent. Charlie!”

“In fact,” interrupted his brother, “you amused yourself by making a character study?”

But Théo didn’t even bother to answer.

“Will that be all, Chief-Inspector?”

“Did you already know Henri before Rose’s death?”

This time Charles was really taken aback. How could Maigret have known all this, when he had told him nothing? Théo’s attitude was beginning to seem less natural, and particularly so his prolonged stay in Étretat.

“I only knew of him by name, since she had chattered to me about all her family; she didn’t like them, of course, claiming that they didn’t understand her.”

“You met Henri Trochu after her death?”

“He stopped me in the street, asked me if I wasn’t the man who’d been going out with his sister, and he looked as if he wanted a fight. I answered him calmly and he quietened down.”

“You’ve seen him again?”

“Yesterday evening, as a matter of fact.”

“Why?”

“Because we happened to meet.”

“Does he bear a grudge against your family?”

“Against Valentine chiefly.”

“For what reason?”

“That’s his business. I suppose you can question him, as you’re questioning me. Charlie!”

Maigret had suddenly discovered whom Théo was painstakingly striving to resemble: it was the Duke of Windsor.

“Just two or three more questions, since you’re good enough to be so obliging. You never went to see Rose at La Bicoque?”

“Never.”

“And you’ve never waited for her near there?”

“She always came here.”

“Did she get drunk when she was with you?”

“After a glass or two she used to get very excited.”

“She showed no sign of wanting to kill herself?”

“She was scared stiff of dying and always used to beg me to drive slowly when we were in the car.”

“Was she fond of your step-mother? Was she devoted to her?”

“I don’t think two women living together from morning to night could be fond of each other.”

“You think they hated each other like poison?”

“I haven’t used that expression.”

“By the way,” interrupted Charles Besson, “that reminds me that I ought to go and see Valentine. It wouldn’t be very nice to come to Étretat without going to see how she is. Will you come with me, Chief-Inspector?”

“No, thank you.”

“Are you going to stay with my brother?”

“I’ll stay here a while longer.”

“You won’t want me any more today? Tomorrow I’ll be at Dieppe, for the funeral. By the way, Théo, my mother-in-law has died.”

“Congratulations.”

He went off, very red in the face, whether as a result of the apéritifs or his brother’s attitude, one couldn’t tell.

“Idiot!” muttered Théo under his breath. “So he made you come specially from Paris?”

He shrugged his shoulders, stretched out his hand for the dice, making it obvious that he had nothing more to say. Maigret took his wallet from his pocket and turned round to Charlie, but Théo merely murmured to the barman:

“Put it on my account.”

On leaving the casino, Maigret spotted Castaing’s car and then the inspector, who was looking for him near the hotel.

“Have you got a moment? Shall we have a drink?”

“I’d rather not. I think I’ve just swallowed three apéritifs one after the other, and I’d prefer to go straight into lunch.”

He was feeling sluggish. All at once he was inclined to view the whole affair in a slightly humorous light, and even Castaing, looking so serious and concerned, appeared like a comic character.

“I feel it would be a good idea if you paid a visit to Yport. In the five years I’ve been in this part of the world I thought I’d got to know the Normans, but I don’t think I’m up to dealing with that family.”

“What do they say?”

“Nothing. Neither yes nor no, neither one thing nor the other. They look at me furtively, don’t ask me to sit down, seem to be waiting for me to go. Occasionally they glance quickly at each other as if to say:

“ ‘Shall we speak to him?’

“ ‘You decide!’

“ ‘No, you!’

“Then the mother comes out with something, probably meaning to give nothing away, but it’s perhaps significant.”

“What sort of thing?”

“For example :

“ ‘That lot, they all stick together and none of them will say anything.’ ”

“What else?”

“ ‘They must have had a good reason for keeping my daughter away from here.’ ”

“She didn’t go to see them any more?”

“Not often, from what I can gather. You see, with that bunch you can understand what you like. You’d think words no longer have the same meaning there as they do anywhere else. They say something and then suddenly take it back. What does come out, is that we’re here, not to find out the truth, but to prevent ‘*that lot*’ from having any trouble.

“They don’t seem to think that Rose’s death was an accident. From what they say, it was she and not Valentine who was the intended victim.

“When the father came back, he did offer me a glass of cider, in the end, since I was under his roof, but not before a long hesitation. The son was there, because he’s not going out fishing until tonight, but he refused to have a glass with us.”

“The eldest son, Henri?”

“Yes. He didn’t say a word. I think he was making them keep quiet. Perhaps, if I met the father in a bistro at Fécamp, he’d tell me more after he’d had a few to drink. What have you been doing?”

“I had a chat with the two Bessons, first Charles and then Théo.”

They sat down at the table. There was a bottle of white wine in front of them, and the inspector filled the two glasses. Maigret didn't notice how much he was drinking, and when they left the dining-room, he was tempted to have a siesta, with his windows wide open onto the sun and the sea.

A sense of decency prevented him. That was also a heritage from his childhood, a sort of feeling of duty which he was inclined to exaggerate, an impression that he was never doing enough to earn his crust, so much so that when he was on holiday, and that didn't happen every year— this year was another example—he was never far from having a sense of guilt.

“What shall I do?” asked Castaing, surprised to see the chief-inspector drowsy and undecided.

“Whatever you like, my boy. Hunt around. I don't know where. Perhaps you could go and see the doctor again?”

“Dr. Jolly?”

“Yes. And the locals! Anybody! Try your luck. Old Mademoiselle Seuret is probably a chatterbox and must get bored all alone by herself.”

“Can I drop you anywhere?”

“No thanks.”

He knew there was a moment like this to get through in every case and that, as if by chance—or was it some sort of instinct which led him? —nearly every time he would have a little too much to drink.

It was when, as he said to himself, it all “began to rumble”.

At the beginning, he didn't know anything, except precise facts, such as are written in the reports. Then he would find himself among people he had never seen, people he had not known the day before, and he would look at them as one looks at photographs in an album.

He had to get to know them as quickly as possible, to ask questions, believe the answers or not believe them, avoid assuming an opinion too early.

It was the period when people and things were clean-cut but a little distant, still anonymous, impersonal.

Then at a given moment, apparently without any reason, it all 'began to rumble'. The people concerned became at the same time vaguer and more human, in particular they became more complicated, and he had to be careful.

In short, he was beginning to see them from the inside, groping, not sure of himself, with the feeling that it would only need another tiny effort for everything to be clear and for the truth to be revealed by itself.

His hands in his pockets, his pipe between his teeth, he was walking slowly along the dusty road which was already becoming familiar, and a detail struck him, a silly thing, but it might be of some importance. He was used to Paris, where there are means of transport at every corner of the street.

How far was it from La Bicoque to the centre of Étretat? Nearly a mile. Valentine didn't have a telephone. She no longer had a car. It was unlikely that she rode a bicycle.

So it was quite a journey for the old lady to get in touch with other people, and she must sometimes spend whole days without seeing a soul. Her closest neighbour was Mademoiselle Seuret, who was almost ninety and probably never left her armchair now.

Did Valentine do her own shopping? Had La Rose seen to all that?

There were some big blackberries in the hedges, but he didn't stop to pick any, nor did he stop to cut a switch, unfortunately he was too old for that. It was amusing to think about it. He was also thinking about Charles and his brother Théo, promising himself to go and drink a glass of cider at the Trochus as well. Would he be offered any?

He pushed open the green-painted gate and breathed in the complex smell of all the flowers and all the shrubs in the garden, heard a repeated scratching sound, and at a turn in the path he saw an old man hoeing round some rose-bushes. It was obviously Honoré, the gardener, who worked for Valentine

three days a week and who Mademoiselle Seuret also employed.

He stood up straight to look at the intruder and raised a hand to his brow, it was impossible to tell whether he was saluting or shading his eyes from the sun.

He was a real gardener “from the picture books”, almost hunchbacked from bending over the ground with little weasel’s eyes and the mistrustful look of an animal poking its head out of its hole.

He didn’t say anything, watched Maigret go past, and only went on with his monotonous scratching when he heard the door open.

It wasn’t Madame Leroy who had troubled to come and open the door, but Valentine herself, who seemed to greet him like an old friend.

“I’ve been having a lot of visitors today,” she announced, quite animated. “Charles came to see me. He seemed disappointed at the way his brother behaved towards you.”

“Did he say anything about our conversation?”

“Which conversation? Let me see. He spoke mainly of old Madame Montet, who’s died, so his whole situation is going to be altered. He’s rich now, richer than he’s ever been, because the old cat owned more than sixty houses, apart from her shares and more than likely a whole pile of gold. What would you like to drink?”

“A glass of water, with as much ice in it as possible.”

“On condition you take a drop of something with it. Just to please me. I never drink alone. That would be terrible, wouldn’t it? Can you see an old woman pouring out glasses of calvados for herself? But when somebody comes, I must admit I’m glad of the opportunity.”

What did it matter, after all? He was feeling better. It was rather warm in the tiny room with the sun shining on his shoulder. Valentine, who had offered him her chair, was pouring him a glass, vivacious and alert, an almost impish glint in her eyes.

“Charles didn’t say anything else?”

“About what?”

“About his brother.”

“He only said he didn’t understand why Théo put himself in such a bad light, adding that he thought he did it on purpose. He was very sore about it. He admires Théo enormously and is very loyal to the family. I bet it wasn’t he who said anything unkind about me.”

“That’s true.”

“Who then?”

He hadn’t been in the house three minutes, and he was the one being questioned, almost without his realizing it.

“My daughter, wasn’t it?”

But she said it with a smile.

“Don’t be afraid of telling tales. She didn’t try to hide it from me. She told me she’d said exactly what she thought to you.”

“I don’t think your daughter’s a very happy person.”

“Do you imagine she wants to be?”

She smiled into her glass, then at Maigret.

“I don’t know whether you’ve had much to do with women. La Rose, for example, would have been terribly unhappy if she hadn’t had endless problems to worry about, philosophical problems you understand, which she’d suddenly start thinking about, in an obstinate way, hardly answering me when I spoke to her, doing the washing-up with a great clatter, as if one were stopping her arriving at some solution on which the fate of the world depended.”

“Is it true she no longer went to see her parents?”

“She seldom went, because they’d have a row every time.”

“Why?”

“Can’t you guess? She would come along with her problems, give them advice she got from the latest books she’d

been reading, and they naturally thought she was a fool.”

“She had no girl-friends?”

“For the same reason. And for the same reason again she didn’t go out with the boys in the district, they were too rough and down-to-earth for her liking.”

“So that apart from you she hardly spoke to a soul?”

“She used to do the shopping, but she couldn’t have said much to anybody. I’m sorry. I’m forgetting the doctor. You see, Rose had found a medical book in my bookcase, and she would bury herself in it occasionally and then ask me some odd questions.

“ ‘You know I haven’t got much longer to live, don’t you?’

“ ‘Are you ill, Rose?’

“She had just found out she had a cancer or, preferably, some rare disease. It would prey on her mind for a few days, then she would ask me for an hour off so that she could go and see the doctor.

“Perhaps it was also an opportunity for her to talk about her problems, because Jolly used to listen to her patiently, without laughing or contradicting her.”

“She spent her evenings with you?”

“I never saw her sit down in the sitting-room, and in any case I shouldn’t have liked it. Do you find me old-fashioned? As soon as the washing-up was done she used to go up to her room, and, without undressing, she would lie down on her bed with a book and smoke cigarettes. She certainly didn’t like the taste of tobacco. She didn’t know how to smoke. She always had to shut her eyes, but it fitted in with her idea of poetry. Am I being cruel? Not so much as you think. Whenever I went upstairs, she would come out, her face puffy, her eyes shining, and she’d wait until I was in bed before she gave me my medicine.

“ ‘Don’t forget to air your room before you go to bed.’

“That was my habitual remark, because the cigarette smoke would get through under the door. She would answer:

“ ‘No, madame. Good-night, madame.’

“Then she would make enough noise getting undressed for a roomful of people.”

Madame Leroy, in the kitchen, was also making a noise, but it sounded as if she were doing it for pleasure, to demonstrate her independence. She came and opened the door, ill-tempered, and glanced sourly at Maigret whom she pretended not to notice.

“Am I to put the soup on?”

“Don’t forget the marrow-bone.”

And turning to the chief-inspector:

“So, apart from Julien, my son-in-law, you’ve met the whole family. It’s not a particularly brilliant one, but they’re not a bad lot either, are they?”

He was trying to think of the phrases Arlette had used about her mother, but without success.

“Like dear old Charles, I shall end up believing it was just an inexplicable accident. You can see I’m still alive, and if, at one time, somebody decided to get rid of me—God knows why—it seems he’s been discouraged. What do you think?”

He wasn’t thinking at all. He was looking at her, his eyes watering a little, with the sun dancing between the two of them. A vague smile was playing on his lips—Madame Maigret would have said he was being smug—while he was wondering, not very seriously, just as a sort of game, whether it was possible to unnerve a woman like this one.

He took his time, let her go on talking, now and then putting the glass of calvados to his lips, and the fruity fragrance of the alcohol was becoming the house’s fragrance, so far as he was concerned, that and an aroma of good cooking, a suggestion of wax polish and cleanliness. She probably did not trust maids to do the cleaning, and he could imagine her in the mornings, a bonnet on her head, dusting the multitude of fragile ornaments with her own hands.

“Do you find me eccentric? Are you going to come to the same conclusion as some of the people round here, that I’m an old crank? You’ll learn soon enough! When one gets old, one doesn’t worry any more about what others say, and one does what one likes.”

“You haven’t seen Théo again?”

“No. Why?”

“Do you know which hotel he’s staying at?”

“I think I heard him say on Sunday that he had a room at the Hôtel des Anglais.”

“No. It’s the Hôtel de la Plage.”

“Why do you imagine he would come and see me again?”

“I don’t know. He knew La Rose well.”

“Théo?”

“He went out with her several times.”

“It couldn’t have happened often, as she hardly ever left the house.”

“Did you prevent her?”

“I didn’t allow her to run around the streets at night, naturally.”

“Nevertheless she did. How many days off did she have?”

“Two Sundays a month. She left when she’d done the washing-up after lunch, and when she went to her parents, she didn’t come back until Monday morning, on the first bus.”

“So you were alone in the house?”

“I’ve already told you I’m not afraid. Are you claiming that there was something between her and Théo?”

“From what he says she merely talked to him, told him too about her problems.”

And he added, a little perfidiously:

“... holding his hand or resting her head on his shoulder!”

She laughed, she laughed so unrestrainedly that she lost her breath.

“Quickly, tell me it’s not true.”

“It’s absolutely true. It’s even the reason why Charles wasn’t very proud of his brother today.”

“Théo told you this in front of him?”

“He had to. He realized that I knew.”

“And how did you know?”

“In the first place, because I met him yesterday with Rose’s brother.”

“Henri?”

“Yes. They were deep in conversation in a café in the town.”

“Where had he met him?”

“I don’t know. According to him, Henri knew about it as well and came to ask for an explanation.”

“It’s too funny! If it hadn’t been you who told me... You see, Monsieur Maigret, you’d have to know Théo to appreciate the point of this story. He’s the biggest snob in the world. It’s probably the only reason for living he has left. He doesn’t mind if he’s bored to death, as long as it’s in select company, and he’d travel hundreds of miles to be seen with some distinguished person.”

“I know.”

“To think of him walking hand in hand with La Rose... Listen! There’s one detail you’re not aware of, something they’ve probably not thought of telling you about my maid. It’s a pity her parents took away her things. I’d have shown you her clothes, particularly her hats. Try and imagine the most extravagant colours, the sort which clash with each other. Rose had a very large bosom. Well, when she went out, for I’d never have permitted her to dress like that here, she wore clothes which were so tight that she could hardly breathe. And on those days she used to avoid me when she left or came

back, because her make-up was so exaggerated, so clumsily put on that she looked like one of those girls you meet on certain street corners in Paris. Théo and her! My heavens!”

And she laughed again, more nervously.

“Tell me, where did they go like this?”

“I only know that they met at the Vaucottes fair, and that they sometimes had a drink together in a little café in Étretat.”

“Long ago?”

He seemed half-asleep now. A vague smile on his lips, he was watching her through half-closed eyes.

“The last time was last Wednesday.”

“Théo told you that?”

“Not very obligingly, but he admitted it all the same.”

“That’s the limit. I hope, at least, that he didn’t come to meet her here, like my daughter’s lover, climbing in through the window?”

“He says not.”

“Théo...” she repeated, still incredulous.

Then she got up to refill the glasses.

“I can just see Henri, the tough one of the family, coming to give him his deserts! But...”

She ceased to look ironic, her face became serious, then amused.

“That would have been the last straw... Théo’s been at Étretat two months, hasn’t he?... Suppose... No, that’s going too far...”

“You think he could have given her a child?”

“No! I’m sorry. It just went through my head, but... Had you considered it also?”

“Incidentally.”

“Anyway, that wouldn’t explain a thing.”

The gardener appeared behind the french windows and waited, motionless, confident that they would notice him eventually.

“Will you excuse me a moment? I must go and tell him what to do.”

Curious, there was a clock ticking somewhere, which he hadn't noticed before, but he finally identified the regular noise as coming from the floor above: it was the purring of the cat, probably asleep on its mistress's bed, which could be heard through the thin ceiling of this doll's house.

The sun, cut into small squares by the window-panes, was dancing on the objects in the room, making reflections and drawing the distinct shape of a lime-tree leaf on the varnish of the table. In the kitchen, Madame Leroy was making enough din for one to think she was moving all the furniture. The scratching began again in the garden.

Maigret imagined that he hadn't stopped hearing this scratching, and nevertheless, when he opened his eyes, he was surprised to see Valentine's face a yard away from him.

She quickly smiled at him so that he should not feel embarrassed, while he muttered, his mouth woolly:

“I must have dropped off to sleep.”

VII

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When they parted, Maigret and the old lady were in such high spirits that one wouldn't have been surprised to see them clap each other on the back.

Did Valentine still smile once the door had been shut behind him? Or rather, as often happens after an uncontrollable fit of laughter, did she have a sudden reaction once she found herself alone again with cold Madame Leroy?

In any case it was an anxious Maigret who, with a slightly heavy step, had reached the town once more and was making his way towards Dr. Jolly's house. All of a sudden, Castaing appeared, as if from out of the wall, but the wall was a bistro, a strategic point where the inspector had been waiting for quite a while, playing cards.

"I've seen the doctor, Chief. There was nothing the matter with La Rose. She was bursting with good health. All the same, she sometimes went to see the doctor, and to make her happy he used to prescribe various harmless mixtures."

"Which were...?"

"Hormones. It was she who wanted them; she talked of nothing else but her glands."

And Castaing, walking beside the chief-inspector, said in some surprise:

"Are you going back there?"

"Just one question to ask him. You can wait for me if you like, laddie."

It was the first time he had spoken so informally to the inspector, who was not in his department, and it was a sign. They were approaching a large square house, the walls covered with ivy, surrounded by a garden almost like a small park.

"That's his place," said Castaing. "But he's in the building on the left, where he sees his patients."

This building was like a shed. Madame Jolly was probably the sort of woman who didn't like sick people or pharmaceutical smells, and had kept all that out of her house.

"Make sure he sees you when you open the door. Otherwise you'll be there for hours."

The walls were white-washed. Around the room, sitting on benches, women, children, and a few old people were waiting. There were a good dozen there.

One child had a big bandage round his head, and a woman wrapped in a shawl was trying in vain to quieten a baby in her arms. All eyes were turned towards a door at the back, behind which could be heard a murmur of voices, and fortunately for Maigret this door opened almost immediately: a fat farmer's wife came out, the doctor looked around the room and noticed the chief-inspector. "Please come in. Just excuse me for a moment." He was counting the patients, separating the wheat from the tares, that's to say, pointing out two or three people to whom he said: "I shan't be able to see you today. Come the day after tomorrow at the same time."

He closed the door again.

"Let's go up to the house. You'll have something to drink, I trust?"

"There's only one question I want to ask you."

"Yes, but I'm pleased to see you and I'm not going to let you go so quickly."

He opened a side-door and led the chief-inspector across the garden towards the big square house.

"It's bad luck that my wife happens to be at Le Havre today. She'd have been so pleased to meet you!"

It was well-to-do, comfortable, a little dark, because of the big trees in the garden.

"The inspector was here a while ago and I told him that La Rose, far from being ill, was fit to be a centenarian. I've rarely come across such a hefty family as hers. You should have seen the way she was built."

“She wasn’t pregnant?”

“What are you asking me that for? It’s certainly the last question I should have asked myself. She came to see me not long ago and made no mention of such a thing. About three months ago I gave her a thorough examination, and I could almost swear that at the time she’d never had sexual relations. What can I give you to drink?”

“Nothing. I’ve just come from Valentine’s where I had to drink more than I really wanted.”

“How is she? Another sturdy woman who has no need of a doctor. An engaging person, isn’t she? I knew her before she married for the second time, even before the first time. I attended the birth of her child.”

“You judge her to be quite normal?”

“Do you mean in her mind? Because she sometimes seems eccentric? Be careful of such people, Chief-Inspector. They’re more sound in the head than most. She knows what she’s about, don’t worry! She always has. And she’s fond of her little life, her little house, her bit of comfort. Can one blame her? I’m not worried about her, not one scrap!”

“And La Rose?”

Maigret was thinking of the patients waiting, the woman nursing the baby, the child with the huge head. But the doctor, who seemed in no hurry had lit a cigar and had made himself comfortable in an armchair, as if he expected the conversation to last a long time.

“In France there are thousands of girls like La Rose. You know her background. She may have spent three years at the village school, not more. Suddenly she found herself in a different setting. She heard too much. She read too much. Do you know what she asked me during one of her visits? What I thought of the theories of Freud. She was also anxious to know if her glandular system wasn’t deficient, and God knows what else.

“I used to pretend to take her seriously. I let her talk. I used to prescribe medicines which had no more effect on her than

water.”

“Was she a melancholy person?”

“Not at all. Just the opposite, she was very gay when she let herself go. Then she started to think, as she said, and took herself seriously. She must have dug up a volume of Dostoievsky at Valentine’s and she read it from cover to cover.”

“None of the drugs you prescribed contained any arsenic?”

“None, you may be sure of that.”

“Thank you.”

“Must you go so soon? I was hoping to have the pleasure of your company for quite a while.”

“I shall probably come back again.”

“If you give me your promise...”

He was sighing, annoyed at being obliged to go back to work so soon.

Castaing was waiting outside.

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to pay a visit to Yport.”

“Shall I drive you there in the Simca?”

“No. I wonder if you shouldn’t ring up your wife and tell her you might be late, that you mightn’t even get back at all tonight.”

“She’s used to it. How are you going to get there? There’s no bus at this time. You can’t walk that far.”

“I’ll take a taxi.”

“If one of the two is free. There only are two at Étretat. Look, the office is at the corner of this lane. What do you want me to do meanwhile?”

“You’re going to hunt for Théo Besson.”

“That won’t be difficult. I’ll only have to go round the bars. And then?”

“Nothing. Just watch him.”

“Discreetly?”

“It doesn’t matter if he sees you. The main thing is not to let him out of your sight. If he leaves town in a car, you’ve got yours. Park it close to his, which must be at the hotel. If that happens, try and leave me a note or send a message to my hotel. I don’t think he’ll go far.”

“If you’re going to see the Trochus, I hope you enjoy yourself.”

The sun was beginning to set when Maigret left the town by taxi, driven by a man who insisted on turning round all the time to talk to him. The chief-inspector still looked half-asleep, sometimes puffing at his pipe, gazing at the countryside which was becoming a dark, sad green, with lights shining in the farmhouses and cows lowing at the gates.

Yport was only a fishing village, but here, like everywhere else along the coast, some of the houses let rooms to summer visitors. The taxi-driver had to ask the way as he did not know the Trochus. He eventually pulled up in front of a single-storied house, surrounded by nets hanging up to dry.

“Shall I wait for you?”

“Please.”

A face could just be seen in profile through the window, and when Maigret knocked on the door, painted brown, he heard a clatter of knives and forks, which showed the family were having supper.

Henri opened the door, his mouth full, and looked at him in silence, without asking him to go in. Behind him blazed an open fire which lit up the room, and above it hung a big cooking-pot. Next to it stood a stove, a fine stove, nearly new, but one could tell it was a luxury, used only on special occasions.

“Might I speak to your father?”

The latter could also see him, but had not said anything yet. There were five or six of them seated round a long table,

without a cloth, steaming plates in front of them, and in the middle a huge plate of potatoes and cod covered in sauce. The mother had her back to the door. A small fair-haired boy was twisting his head round to have a look at the visitor.

“Bring him in, Henri,” the father said, finally.

And wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve he got up from the table so slowly that his action became something almost solemn. He seemed to be saying to the others, to his brood:

“Don’t be frightened. I’m here and nothing can happen.”

Henri didn’t sit down again, but remained standing near an iron bedstead underneath a coloured print of Millet’s *Angelus*.

“I suppose you’re the boss of the one who was here before?”

“I’m Chief-Inspector Maigret.”

“And what do you want us for this time?”

He had a handsome sailor’s face, the sort Sunday painters love, and even in his own home he never took off his cap. He seemed as broad as he was tall, in his blue sweater which exaggerated the width of his torso.

“I’m doing my best to discover who killed...”

“... my daughter!” concluded Trochu, anxious to stress the fact that it was his daughter and nobody else’s who was dead.

“Exactly. I’m sorry it means disturbing you, and I didn’t expect you to be having dinner.”

“What time do you have supper at your place? Much later, I’m sure, like other folks who needn’t get up at half-past four in the morning.”

“Please go on with your meal.”

“I’ve finished.”

The others were still eating in silence, stiffly, never taking their eyes off Maigret, not missing a word their father said. Henri had lit a cigarette, perhaps as a sign of defiance. The

chief-inspector hadn't yet been offered a chair, and he seemed enormous in the low-ceilinged room, with sausages hanging from the beams.

There was not just one, but two beds, one a child's in the room, and an open door revealed a bedroom where there were three others, but no washstand, which seemed to suggest that the whole family went outside to wash at the well.

"You've collected your daughter's things?"

"It was my right, wasn't it?"

"I'm not reproaching you. It would probably help me do my job if I knew what they consisted of exactly."

Trochu turned towards his wife, and Maigret was at last able to see her face. She looked young to have such a large family and such grownup children as La Rose and Henri. She was thin, dressed in black, with a brooch fastened in the middle of her bosom.

They were looking at each other, embarrassed, and the children were fidgeting on their benches.

"It's just that it's already been shared out."

"All the things aren't here any more?"

"Jeanne, who works at Le Havre, took away the dresses and underwear she could make use of. She couldn't take the shoes, they were too small for her."

"I've got them!" called out a girl of about fourteen, with long reddish hair.

"Keep quiet!"

"It's not so much the clothes that interest me as the little odds and ends. Were there any letters?"

This time the parents turned round towards Henri, and Henri didn't seem very inclined to reply. Maigret repeated his question.

"No," he said.

"No pocket-book either, or any notes?"

“I only found the almanac.”

“What almanac?”

Reluctantly, he went to look for it in the next room. Maigret remembered that when he too had been young and lived in the country, he had seen these almanacs, badly printed on poor paper, with childish illustrations. He was surprised that they still existed.

Each day of the month was followed by a prediction.

One would read, for example:

“17 August. Melancholy.”

“18 August. Nothing to be undertaken. No journeys.”

“19 August. The morning will be a happy one, but be careful in the evening.”

He didn't smile as he leafed gravely through the little book, which had been handled a lot. But he could find nothing of special interest in the month of September, nor at the end of the preceding month.

“You didn't find any other papers?”

Then it was the mother's turn to get up, to have her say, and obviously the whole family were behind her, applauding the reply they were expecting.

“Do you really think it's here you have to come to ask these questions? I'd like somebody to tell me once and for all if it's my daughter who's dead or not. In this case, it seems to me it's not us who should be bothered, but those others, the ones you're so careful to leave in peace.”

There was a sense of relief in the air. The fourteen-year-old girl almost clapped her hands.

“Just because we're poor people,” she went on, “because some people put on airs...”

“I can assure you, Madame, I make no distinction between rich and poor in my investigations.”

“What about those who make out they’re rich when they’re not? And those who pretend to be grand ladies and were once even lower than us?”

Maigret showed no reaction, hoping she would go on, and she did so, after looking around for fresh courage.

“Do you know what she is, that woman? I’m going to tell you. When my poor mother married it was to a decent fellow who’d been in love with someone else for a long time, with Valentine’s mother in fact, and they lived almost next door to each other. Well, the boy’s parents wouldn’t have him marrying her. That’ll tell you what sort of a girl she was...”

If Maigret understood correctly, it was Valentine’s mother who was the sort of girl not to marry.

“She got married, you’ll be telling me, but she only got a drunkard, a good-for-nothing, and Madame is the result of that lot!”

The Trochus’ father had taken a short pipe from his pocket and was filling it from a tobacco pouch made from a pig’s bladder.

“I never liked my daughter working for a woman like that, who was probably worse than her mother. If they’d only listened to me...”

A look full of reproach at her husband’s back, who, at one time, must have given Rose permission to go into service at Valentine’s.

“She’s an evil woman, into the bargain. Don’t you smile. I know what I’m talking about. She probably took you in with her put-on airs. But I tell you again, she’s an evil woman, she’s jealous of everybody, she always hated my Rose.”

“Why did your daughter stay with her?”

“I’m still wondering. She didn’t like her any more than we did.”

“Did she tell you so?”

“She didn’t tell me anything. She never talked about her employers. Towards the end she hardly talked to us any more

at all. We weren't good enough for her any longer, see? That was that woman's doing. She taught her to despise her family, and I'll never forgive her for that. Now, Rose is dead, and that one came and put on her grand airs at her funeral, when more than likely she should have been in jail!"

This time her husband looked at her as if he wished to calm her down.

"Anyhow, this isn't the place to come looking for things!" she concluded forcefully.

"Will you allow me to say one word?"

"Let him speak," interrupted Henri, in turn.

"We policemen aren't magicians. How can we find out who committed a crime, if we don't know why the crime was committed?"

He was speaking to them gently, as kindly as he could.

"Your daughter's been poisoned. By whom? I shall probably know that when I discover *why* she was poisoned."

"I tell you that woman hated her."

"That's probably not enough. Don't forget murder is a very serious matter and the murderer's own head is at stake, or at any rate his liberty."

"Clever people don't risk much."

"I think your son will understand what I mean, when I add that other people were quite close to Rose."

Henri looked embarrassed.

"And there may be others still whom we aren't aware of. That's why I was hoping to have a look at her things. There might have been some letters, addresses, even things she'd been given as presents."

At the sound of this last word they were all silent, looking from one to the other. They seemed to be questioning one another, and at last the mother said, with still a trace of mistrust :

“Are you going to show him the ring?”

She was addressing her husband, who decided, unwillingly, to take a large worn wallet from his trouser pocket. It had numerous compartments, one of which was fastened with a press-stud. He took from it something wrapped in tissue-paper which he handed to Maigret. It was a ring, of an old-fashioned type, with a green stone set in the bezel.

“I expect your daughter had other pieces of jewellery?”

“There was a little box full of them, things she bought herself at the Fécamp fairs. They’ve already been parcelled out. The only thing left here...”

The young girl, without saying a word, ran into the bedroom and returned with a silver bracelet set with blue porcelain stones.

“That’s what I got!” she said proudly.

The lot would not be worth many francs, a few rings, medals, souvenirs of first communion.

“Was this ring with the rest?”

“No.”

The fisherman turned to his wife, who again hesitated a little.

“I found it right at the bottom of a shoe, in a little ball of tissue-paper. They were her best shoes, which she didn’t wear more than twice.”

The light from the hearth was not favourable for an expert appraisal, and Maigret was no expert in precious stones, but it was perfectly obvious that this jewel was of a different quality from the others they had told him about.

“I tell you,” Trochu said at last, now red in the face. “That thing worried me. Yesterday I had to go to Fécamp and while I was there I went to see the jeweller who once sold me our wedding rings. I wrote the word he told me on a piece of paper. It’s an emerald. He added it was worth as much as a fishing-boat, and that if I’d found it, the best thing to do would be to take it to the police.”

Maigret turned to Henri.

“That’s the reason?” he asked him.

Henri nodded. The mother asked, suspiciously:

“What are you hatching, you two? Have you already met?”

“I think I had better put you in the picture. I saw your son with Théo Besson. It surprised me, but now I understand. As a matter of fact, Théo went out two or three times with Rose.”

“Is that right?” she asked Henri.

“That’s right.”

“You knew that? And you didn’t say a word?”

“I went to ask him if he was the one who gave my sister the ring and what exactly went on between them.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked to see the ring. I couldn’t show it to him because Dad had it in his pocket. I explained what it looked like. I didn’t know it was an emerald then, but that’s the word he said right away.”

“It was him?”

“No. He swore he’d never given her a present. He explained he looked on her as a friend, somebody he liked talking to, because she was intelligent.”

“You believed that? You believe what that family tell you?”

Henri looked at the chief-inspector, continued:

“He’s trying to discover the truth, as well. He maintains the police won’t ever find it out. He even says”—his lip trembled a little—“that it was Valentine who got you here and that it’s as if you were in her pay.”

“I’m not in anybody’s pay.”

“I’m just repeating what he said.”

“Henri, are you sure it wasn’t he who gave your sister the ring?” his father asked, puzzled.

“He sounded sincere to me. And he said he wasn’t rich, and even if he sold his car, he’d never be able to buy a ring like that, provided the stone’s genuine.”

“Where does he say it comes from?” Maigret asked in turn.

“He doesn’t know either.”

“Did Rose sometimes go to Paris?”

“She’s never been there in her life.”

“And neither have I,” interrupted the mother. “Nor have I any wish to go there. It’s quite enough to have to go to Le Havre sometimes.”

“Did she go to Le Havre?”

“Sometimes she went to visit her sister.”

“And Dieppe as well?”

“I don’t think so. What would she be going to Dieppe for?”

“The truth is,” Madame Trochu interrupted again, “that at the end we hardly knew anything about her doings. When she came to see us, she blew in and out again, just to criticize everything we did, everything we said. If she opened her mouth, she didn’t speak as we had taught her, but used words nobody could understand.”

“Was she attached to Valentine?”

“Did she like her, you mean? If you ask me, she hated her. I could tell that from some things she said. ”

“What things?”

“I can’t remember now, but it struck me at the time.”

“Why did she stay with her?”

“That’s what I always asked her. She never answered.”

Trochu now resolved to do what Inspector Castaing had foretold he wouldn’t do till the last moment.

“You’ve not been given anything to drink. Perhaps you’d like a glass of cider? As you haven’t had your meal I won’t offer you any spirits.”

He went out to draw it from the barrel in the shed, came back with a bluish stone pitcher full and took a cloth from a drawer to wipe two glasses.

“Can you let me have this ring for a day or two?”

“It’s not ours. I don’t look on it as ever belonging to my daughter. Only, if you take it away, you must give me a receipt for it.”

Maigret made one out on a corner of the table, which they cleared for him. He drank the cider, and although it was a little sharp, he complimented them on it as much as possible, for Trochu made it himself every autumn.

“Believe me,” the woman was saying as she showed him to the door. “It was really La Rose they wanted to kill. And if they’re trying to make you believe the opposite, it’s because they’ve got good reasons for doing so.”

“I hope we shall know soon.”

“Do you think it will be as quick as that?”

“Perhaps quicker than you imagine.”

He had put the tissue-paper with the ring into his waistcoat pocket. He looked at the cot in which La Rose probably slept when she was little, the bedroom she had later shared with her sisters, the fire-place in front of which she had crouched down to make the soup.

If he was no longer exactly an enemy, he was still a stranger, and they maintained an attitude of reserve as they watched him go. Only Henri accompanied the chief-inspector to his car.

“Would you mind taking me to Étretat?”

“I’d be delighted.”

“I must just get my cap and bag.”

He heard him explaining to his family:

“I’m getting a lift in the inspector’s car. I’ll go straight from Étretat to the ship at Fécamp.”

He came back carrying a canvas bag, which must have contained his things for going out fishing. The car's engine started. Looking back, Maigret could once more see silhouettes outlined in front of the open door.

"Do you think he lied to me?" Henri asked as he lit a cigarette.

The car was full of the strong smell of the sea from his clothes.

"I don't know."

"Are you going to show him the ring?"

"Perhaps."

"When I went looking for him the first time, I meant to knock his head off."

"I can understand that. What I'm wondering about is how he managed to stop you."

Henri pondered on this.

"I wondered too. He isn't the sort I'd imagined, and I'm sure he didn't try to sleep with my sister."

"Have others tried?"

"The Baboeuf boy, when she was seventeen, and I can promise you I got even with him for that."

"Rose never spoke of getting married?"

"Who to?"

He also seemed to be under the impression that there was nobody in the district to suit his sister.

"Do you want to tell me anything?"

"No."

"Why did you come with me?"

"I don't know. I felt like seeing him again."

"To have another talk to him about the ring?"

“About that and everything. I haven’t had your education, but I can tell there are things going on which aren’t right.”

“You hope to find him in the little bar where I saw you both?”

“There or somewhere else. But I’d rather get out of the car before then.”

He got out, in fact, as soon as they came to the town and walked away, his bag over his shoulder, after casually saying his thanks.

Maigret first called at his hotel, but there was no message for him, and he next pushed open the door of Charlie’s bar, at the casino.

“Not seen my inspector?”

“He was in just before dinner.”

Charlie looked at the clock, which said nine o’clock, and added: “Quite a while ago now.”

“Théo Besson?”

“They came in and went out one after the other.”

He winked to show he understood.

“Anything to drink?”

“No thanks.”

It looked as if Henri had made the journey to Étretat for nothing, since Maigret found Castaing on guard outside the Hôtel de la Plage.

“Is he there?”

“He went up to his room about a quarter of an hour ago.”

The inspector pointed to a light in a window on the second floor.

VIII

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Two or three times that evening Castaing looked at Maigret covertly, wondering if he knew what he was about, if he really was the great man whom all the young inspectors endeavoured to imitate, or whether, at least today, he wasn't on a wild-goose chase, or at any rate letting himself be carried along by events.

"Let's go and sit down for a while," the chief-inspector had said when he had joined him opposite the hotel where he was keeping watch.

The virtuous citizens who protest at the number of licensed premises don't suspect what a blessing they are to policemen. As if by chance, there was one fifty yards from the Hôtel de la Plage, where by bending their heads forward they could keep their eyes on Théo's windows.

Castaing had thought the chief-inspector wanted to talk to him, to give him instructions.

"I'd like a café-cognac," Maigret declared. "It's not warm tonight."

"Have you had dinner?"

"Actually, no, I haven't."

"You're not going to have dinner?"

"Not now."

But he was not drunk. He must have had a lot to drink since the morning, here and there, and that was probably why he felt so heavy.

"Perhaps he's going to bed," he remarked, looking at the window.

"Shall I go on hanging around all the same?"

"You will, my lad. But so long as your eyes don't leave the hotel door, which is more important than the window, you can

stay sitting here. As for me, I think I'll pop in and say good-night to Valentine."

But he remained seated for a good quarter of an hour, not saying a word, staring vacantly in front of him. At last he stood up with a sigh, walked off, his pipe between his teeth, his hands in his pockets, and Castaing heard his step fade away in the deserted streets.

It was a few minutes to ten when Maigret arrived at the gate of La Bicoque, on the road which was lit by a new moon circled by a wide halo. He hadn't met a soul. There had been no dog to bark, no cat to jump into the hedge as he came along. The only thing to be heard was the rhythmical chant of frogs in some pond or other.

Standing on tip-toe, he tried to see if there was a light still on in the old lady's house, thought he saw one on the ground floor and walked towards the gate, which stood open.

It was damp in the garden, with a strong smell of mould. He wasn't able to walk along the path without brushing against some branches, and the rustling of the foliage must have been heard inside.

He reached the paved part near the house, saw the living-room lit up, and inside, Valentine, who was getting up from her chair, straining her ears, standing motionless a moment before moving to the wall and, at the moment he was least expecting it, turning off the light.

He sneezed, just at that moment. A squeaking noise told him that one of the windows was being opened.

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Maigret."

A little laugh, not without a hint of nervousness, as of one who, in spite of himself, has been frightened.

"I'm sorry. I'll put the light on straight away."

And more softly, as if to herself:

"The stupid thing is that I can't find the switch. Ah! There it is..."

She must have switched on two, for not only was her sitting-room lit up again, but a lamp also came on in the garden, almost above the chief-inspector's head.

"I'll open the door for you."

She was dressed as he had grown accustomed to seeing her, and on a small table, in front of the armchair, where he had surprised her cards were spread out for a game of patience.

She was trotting with tiny steps through the empty house, going from one room to the next, turning a key, sliding the bolts.

"You see, I'm not so brave as I make out and I barricade myself in. I wasn't expecting your visit."

She didn't want to ask him questions, but she was intrigued.

"Have you a moment? Come in and sit down."

And as he was glancing at the cards:

"You have to amuse yourself when you live alone, don't you? What would you like to drink?"

"Do you know, ever since I've been at Étretat, I've been drinking from morning till night? Your step-son Charles comes along in the morning and makes me drink picon-grenadines. Théo joins us, and that makes it his round. Whenever I meet the inspector, we go into a café to have a chat. I come here and the bottle of calvados automatically appears on the table. The doctor is no less hospitable. The Trochus give me cider."

"Did they receive you kindly?"

"Not too badly?"

"Did they tell you anything interesting?"

"Perhaps. Before the end, it's difficult to unravel what's interesting from what isn't. Nobody's paid you a visit since I left?"

"Nobody. It was I who paid one. I went to say good-evening to old Mademoiselle Seuret. She's so old indeed that everyone thinks she's dead and no one goes to see her any more. She's

my nearest neighbour. If I was young enough I could be there just by jumping over the hedge.

“That’s how it is. Now, I’m on my own. My dragon has been gone for ages. I had intended to take on another maid to sleep at the house, but I’m wondering whether I shall after all, I like it so well on my own.”

“You’re not frightened?”

“Sometimes, as you saw. A few minutes ago when I heard your step, I was a bit nervous. I’ve often wondered what I’d do if I were visited by a night-prowler. Tell me if you think my plan’s a good one. First of all turn the light off indoors, and then switch on the one outside, so that you can see without being seen.”

“It seems an excellent method.”

“Only, just now, I forgot to turn on the light outside. I must try to remember next time and find the switch.”

He looked at her feet, noticed that she was wearing walking-shoes and not slippers. But would she permit herself to wear slippers, even in her own home, except in the bedroom?

“Still nothing new, Monsieur Maigret?”

He was sitting in what by now could almost be called his chair, and the room looked even more intimate by night than during the day, with its circles of subdued light beneath the lamps and wide areas in semi-darkness. The cat was downstairs, on one of the armchairs, and it wasn’t long before it came to rub itself against the chief-inspector’s legs, its tail in the air.

“You don’t know cat’s language?” she joked.

“No. Why?”

“Because that’s his way of asking you to stroke him. Were you worried about me?”

“I just wanted to be sure that everything was all right here.”

“Aren’t you satisfied about that yet? Tell me! I hope you’re not going to condemn a poor inspector to spend the night on

the road in order to protect me? If so, you should let me know, and I'd put up a camp-bed in the kitchen."

She was very cheerful, a tiny glint in her eyes. She had brought the flask and was pouring herself a glass as full as his.

"Your wife never complains about your job?"

"She's had time to get used to it."

Half-asleep in his armchair, he had filled his pipe and was watching the time by a bronze clock, flanked by two chubby Cupids.

"Do you often play patience?"

"There are few games one person can play alone, you know."

"La Rose didn't play?"

"I tried to teach her Belote without having any success."

She must have been wondering why he had come. For a while, perhaps, he looked so far away that she was afraid he had fallen asleep in his chair, as he had done that afternoon.

"I'd do better to go back to my hotel and to bed," he sighed.

"One last glass?"

"Will you have one with me?"

"Yes."

"All right then, I will. I'm beginning to know the way and there's little risk now of my getting lost. I expect you'll be going to bed, too?"

"In about half an hour."

"Sleeping draught?"

"No. I didn't buy any. It frightens me a little, now."

"You sleep all the same?"

"Eventually I go off. Old people don't need much sleep."

"Until tomorrow then."

"Good-night."

He made the branches crackle again, and the gate creaked slightly. He stood still for a moment on the side of the road, looking at the top of the roof and the chimney which stood out above the trees in the pale light of the moon.

Then, because of the damp chill in the air, he pulled up the collar of his coat and walked swiftly towards the town.

He went round all the bistros that were still open, not because he wanted to go in, but only to glance inside, and he was surprised not to see Henri, who must still be searching for Théo.

Did Henri know he had gone back to his hotel? Had he been there to see him?

Perhaps he had departed without accomplishing his purpose? Maigret didn't know what time his boat was leaving the harbour at Fécamp for its fortnight's fishing in the North Sea.

He went for a moment into the casino bar, which was empty, and where Charlie was busy counting the takings.

"You didn't see a fisherman?"

"The Trochu boy? He was here at least an hour ago. He was in a rush then."

"He didn't say anything?"

"Not to me, no. He was talking to himself. He almost forgot his bag, and when he flung it onto his shoulders he swept the counter with it and broke two glasses."

Castaing was outside in the street again, probably to keep himself awake, and the light was still on in Théo's room.

"You didn't meet Rose's brother, chief? He went past here a while ago, zigzagging from side to side."

"Did he go into the hotel?"

"I don't think he even noticed there was a hotel."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"I flattened myself against the wall."

“Which way was he heading?”

“He went down the street, and then, probably so as not to leave the pavement, he turned right. What are we doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Staying here?”

“Why not?”

“You think he’s going to come out?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible.”

Thereupon, for the second time, Castaing wondered whether the reputation of the chief-inspector had not been exaggerated. In any case he ought not to have had so much to drink.

“Go in the hotel and find out if anybody’s been asking for him or if anyone went upstairs to his room.”

Castaing came back in a few minutes with a negative answer.

“Are you sure he didn’t speak to anybody in the bars when you were following him?”

“Only to ask for drinks. He knew I was tailing him. He looked at me from time to time, hesitatingly. I think he was wondering whether it wouldn’t be simpler if we drank together.”

“Nobody gave him a note?”

“I didn’t notice anything of the kind. You don’t think it would be a good idea if you went and had a sandwich?”

Maigret didn’t seem to hear him, took a cold pipe from his pocket and slowly filled it. The halo round the crescent moon was getting wider, and there was a mist coming from the open sea and gradually invading the streets.

It wasn’t real fog yet, because the siren had not begun to hoot.

“In a week,” Castaing remarked, “only the inhabitants will be left here. The staffs of the hotels will go off to the South to start a new season, with new customers.”

“What time do you make it?”

“Twenty to eleven.”

Something must have been troubling Maigret, for after a while he said:

“I’m leaving you for a moment. I’m going to my hotel to make a ’phone call.”

He went into the telephone box, and called Charles Besson’s house, at Fécamp.

“Maigret speaking. I’m sorry to disturb you. I hope you weren’t in bed?”

“No. Is there anything new? Now my wife’s got bronchitis, and she still wants to go to the funeral tomorrow.”

“Tell me, Monsieur Besson. Your wife never owned a ring set with a large emerald?”

“A what?”

He repeated what he had said.

“No.”

“You’ve never seen a ring like that anywhere? Arlette, for example?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Hallo! Monsieur Maigret...”

“Yes.”

“What’s this about a ring? Have you found one?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll tell you about it one day.”

“Is everything all right down there?”

“Everything’s quiet at the moment.”

Maigret hung up, hesitated, finally asked for Arlette’s number in Paris. He got through at once, more quickly than his previous call. A man’s voice answered, and it was his first contact with Julien.

“Julien Sudre speaking,” said a calm, rather serious voice.
“Who’s that?”

“Chief-Inspector Maigret. I’d like to have a word with
Madame Sudre.”

He heard him saying, without anxiety:

“It’s for you. The chief-inspector.”

“Hallo! Has anything happened?”

“I don’t think so. Not yet. I only wanted to ask you a
question. Have you ever had any jewellery stolen?”

“Why do you ask me that?”

“Answer me.”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Have you got much?”

“A few pieces. They’ve been given me by my husband.”

“Have you ever owned a ring set with quite a decent-sized
emerald?”

There was a short silence.

“No.”

“You don’t remember seeing a ring of that kind?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Have you nothing else to tell me?”

“Nothing tonight.”

She didn’t want him to hang up. It sounded as if she would
have liked him to go on talking. Perhaps she wanted to say
something herself, but couldn’t do so while her husband was
there.

“Nothing unpleasant?” she simply asked.

“Nothing. Good-night. I expect you’re going to bed, both of
you?”

She suspected irony and said dryly:

“Yes. Good-night.”

There was only the night-porter in the hall of the hotel. At the far end was the armchair where he had found Arlette waiting the previous evening. He hadn't yet got to know her then. He hadn't yet got to know anybody.

He was sorry he hadn't brought his overcoat, almost rang Madame Maigret to say good-night to her, shrugged his shoulders and went to join Castaing, who was gloomily continuing his watch. In this hotel as well, the hall was empty. Nearly all the windows, with the exception of two or three, were in darkness, and yet another light was put out, but not Théo's.

“I wonder what he can be doing,” Castaing murmured. “He's probably reading in bed. Unless he's gone to sleep and forgotten to turn out the light.”

“What's the time?”

“Midnight.”

“You're sure nobody...”

And then the inspector slapped his forehead, uttered an oath and muttered:

“What an idiot I am! I forgot to tell you...”

“What?”

“It's true nobody spoke to him. Nor did anybody give him a note. But while we were in the bar at the 'Poste', the second one he went to, the barman said to him at one point:

“ ‘You're wanted on the telephone.’ ”

“What time was it?”

“Just after eight o'clock.”

“They didn't say who was ringing?”

“No. He went into the telephone box. I watched him through the window. He wasn't doing the talking. He was listening, saying every now and then: ‘Yes... Yes...’ ”

“That’s all?”

“I wonder how it could have gone out of my head. I hope it’s not serious, Chief?”

“We shall find out. What sort of expression did he have on his face when he came out of the telephone box?”

“I couldn’t say exactly. Perhaps a little surprised? Perhaps intrigued? But not annoyed.”

“Come on. You can wait for me in the hall.”

He asked the porter:

“Monsieur Besson’s room?”

“Number 29 on the second floor. I think he’s asleep. He said he wasn’t to be disturbed.”

Maigret walked past him, without explaining, started up the stairs, stopped a minute to get his breath and was soon in front of the white door which bore the number 29 in copper figures. He knocked, and there was no reply. He knocked longer and louder, then leaned over the banisters.

“Castaing?”

“Yes, Chief.”

“Ask them for a skeleton key. They must have something which opens all the doors.”

This took some time. Maigret emptied his pipe on the carpet, just next to a large earthenware pot which contained sand and cigarette ends.

The porter came along first, in a bad temper.

“Just as you like! You must explain to the manager tomorrow. Police or no police, it’s not what I call manners.”

He chose a key from a bunch hanging at the end of a chain, but before opening he knocked discreetly, putting his ear to the door.

Eventually they saw the room, which was empty, and the bed had not been disturbed. Maigret opened a cupboard, saw a

navy-blue suit, a pair of black shoes and a raincoat. Razor and tooth-brush were in the bathroom.

“The gentleman’s entitled to go out if he wants to, isn’t he?”

“Do you know if his car’s in the garage?”

“That’s easily checked on.”

They went downstairs again. Instead of going towards the main entrance, they walked along a corridor, down some steps, and Maigret saw that a small door, which wasn’t locked, led directly into the garage.

The doors were wide open and one space was empty.

“That was his.”

Poor Castaing looked like a schoolboy wondering what the punishment would be for his foolishness.

“Where shall we go?”

“Where’s your car?”

“Opposite your hotel.”

It was only a few yards away. Just as they were getting in, the night porter rushed out onto the steps.

“Monsieur Maigret! Monsieur Maigret!... Somebody’s just telephoned for you.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“A woman?”

“It was a man’s voice. You’re asked to go to the old lady’s place at once. He said you’d understand.”

It didn’t take a minute to get there. A car was already parked outside the gate.

“The doctor’s car,” Castaing said.

But even as they came closer to the house, they could hear no sound of voices. The rooms were all lit up, including those upstairs. Théo Besson, very calm, opened the door, and the chief-inspector looked at him in amazement.

“Who’s been hurt?”

His nostrils quivered. He recognized the smell of burnt powder in the sitting-room. On the table, where the cards were still spread out, there was a big military revolver.

He went into the spare bedroom, where he could hear people moving about, and almost knocked over Valentine, her hands full of bloodstained linen, who looked at him like a sleep-walker.

On the bed Arlette had slept in, a man was stretched out, the upper part of his body naked. He was still wearing his trousers and shoes. Dr. Jolly’s back, as he bent over him, was hiding his face from view, but the coarse weave of his blue trousers had already identified him to Maigret.

“Dead?” he asked.

The doctor started, turned around and stood erect, as if relieved.

“I’ve done what I could,” he sighed.

There was a hypodermic syringe on the bedside table. The doctor’s bag was open on the floor, everything falling out of it. There was blood everywhere, and afterwards Maigret was to find a trail of it in the living-room and outside, in the garden.

“When Valentine telephoned I hurried round straight away, but it was already too late. The bullet would have to lodge in the aorta! Even a transfusion, if it could have been done on the spot, would have been useless.”

“Was it you who got in touch with my hotel?”

“Yes, she’d asked me to let you know.”

She was quite close to them, standing in the doorway, blood on her hands, blood on her dress.

“It’s horrible,” she said. “I little suspected what might happen when you came this evening. All this because I again forgot to turn on the second switch, the one for the lamp in the garden.”

He avoided looking at her, heard a sigh as he saw the face of Henri Trochu, dead in his turn. Perhaps he was already thinking what he was going to say to the family, thinking of their reactions?

“I must explain it all.”

“I know.”

“You can’t know. I was upstairs. I was in bed.”

It was indeed the first time he had seen her not perfectly dressed. Her hair was in curlers, and she had hurriedly slipped a dress over her nightgown, which was showing underneath.

“I think I’d gone off to sleep at last, when the cat suddenly jumped onto the end of my bed. That’s what woke me up. I listened. I heard a noise outside, the same as when you came this evening.”

“Where was the revolver?”

“In the cupboard beside my bed. It’s my husband’s revolver. I got the habit from him of always having it within hand’s reach during the night. I think I told you that.”

“No. It doesn’t matter.”

“First of all, I looked out of the window, but it was too dark. I put on a dress and came downstairs.”

“Without switching on the light?”

“Yes. I couldn’t see anything, but I could hear someone trying to open the door. I asked:

“ ‘Who’s there?’

“Nobody answered.”

“Did you shoot straight away?”

“I don’t remember. I must have asked the same thing several times, while he was still fiddling with the lock. I shot through the pane. I heard the man fall down, and I still stayed there for a while, not daring to go outside.”

“You didn’t know who it was?”

“I had no idea. It was only then that I thought of switching on the outside light. Through the broken pane I saw a body, with a large bundle beside it. My first thought was that it was a tramp. Eventually I went out through the kitchen door and only as I came closer did I recognize Henri.”

“Was he still alive?”

“I don’t know. I ran across to Mademoiselle Seuret’s still holding the revolver in my hand. I called out to her to get up, that I had to use the telephone immediately, and at last she came and opened the door. I rang Dr. Jolly and asked him to tell you what had happened or collect you on his way here.”

“And Théo?”

“I found him in front of the door when I came back.”

“You came back alone?”

“No. I waited for the doctor on the road.”

The doctor had just covered the dead man’s face with a sheet and, holding his blood-stained hands in front of him, was making his way to the bathroom.

Maigret and Valentine were alone together beside the body, in the tiny room where it was almost impossible to move, and the chief-inspector still had his pipe in his mouth.

“What did Théo say to you?”

“I don’t remember. He didn’t say anything.”

“You weren’t surprised to see him here?”

“Probably. I don’t know. Don’t forget I had just killed a man. Why do you think Henri was trying to get into my house?”

He didn’t answer, but walked into the sitting-room, where he found Castaing and Théo standing facing each other, both equally silent. Of the two of them, the inspector looked the more worried, and he turned to the chief-inspector with despair on his face.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?”

“We can’t be sure yet.”

Théo Besson was looking annoyed, like a man of the world surprised in an embarrassing situation.

“It was just by chance you happened to be round here, I suppose?”

He did not answer, and he seemed to be excusing Maigret for addressing him so rudely.

“Come through here, lad.”

He led Castaing out into the garden, where he saw blood on the flagstones and the fisherman’s bag on the ground where it had been dropped.

“You slip off to his hotel. I want to know if anyone telephoned Théo during the evening. If it turns out they can’t tell you anything, go around all the bars Henri went to.”

“They’ll be closed.”

“Knock them up!”

“What do I have to ask them?”

“If he used the telephone.”

Castaing failed to understand, but he badly wanted to make up for his blunder by any possible means, and he hurried off to the Simca, which could soon be heard driving off.

Dr. Jolly and Valentine were coming down from the bathroom, and the doctor’s hands were white, still smelling of soap.

“It’s no use. She just won’t go to bed and let me give her an injection. She’s living on her nerves at the moment. She thinks she’s strong. She’d collapse before I’d been gone a quarter of an hour. And I just don’t understand how she’s been able to do all she has done.”

“I killed that poor boy,” Valentine muttered, looking from Maigret to Théo, who remained motionless and silent in the corner.

“Won’t you persuade her? She’d sleep like a log for several hours and tomorrow she’d be as fit as a fiddle.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary.”

Jolly frowned, but yielded, and looked around for his hat.

“I suppose I’d better ring Le Havre, like last Sunday, so that they can come and collect the body. There’ll be an autopsy, I presume?”

“Certainly.”

“You don’t want me to give them a message?”

“No thank you.”

He went and bowed to the old lady and even looked as if he were going to kiss her hand.

“You’re wrong, you know! Just in case, I’ve left a few tablets in your room. You can take one every two hours.”

He nodded to Théo, turned towards Maigret, but didn’t know what to say.

“Of course I shall be at your service if you need me.”

He left, and they were silent. When the noise of the car engine could no longer be heard, Valentine, as if to keep herself in countenance, opened the cupboard and took out the flask of calvados. She was about to put it on the table when Maigret, unexpectedly, grabbed it roughly from her hands and threw it violently on the floor.

“Sit down, both of you!” he said, in a voice which was trembling with anger.

They obeyed, hardly aware what they were doing, while he remained standing, his hands behind his back, then began to pace up and down the room, as he always did in his office in the Quai des Orfèvres.

Castaing was already on the way back, and the fog siren was starting to send out its mournful warning into the night.

They heard Castaing stop his car outside, get out, pause for a moment on the road before pushing open the gate, and still Maigret had not said a word. Théo, seated in the armchair the chief-inspector had occupied a few hours earlier, was still doing his best, in spite of everything, to look like the Duke of Windsor, while Valentine was glancing from one man to the other so swiftly that she reminded one of a young animal.

Castaing crossed the garden, entered the house, and, astonished by the silence, by the broken bottle, was wondering what he should do, where he should go. As he was not from Police Headquarters, he had never seen Maigret in such circumstances.

“Well, my lad?”

“I got hold of the proprietor of the hotel; he was in bed, but he spoke to me on the telephone. He was the one who put the call through from the office to Théo, not in his room, since there are no 'phones in the bedrooms, but at the end of the corridor on his floor. It was about half-past ten. The man who rang was drunk.”

“Have you got a pencil and paper?”

“I've got my notebook.”

“Sit down at this table. Make yourself comfortable, because you'll probably be here for quite a while. Take down their answers.”

He began to pace up and down again, the old lady following him with her eyes, while Théo stared at the toes of his shoes.

He eventually planted himself in front of the latter, no longer angry, but his voice was contemptuous.

“Were you expecting Henri to come to Étretat this evening?”

“No.”

“Would you have come to La Bicoque if he hadn't telephoned you?”

“I don’t know. Possibly.”

“Where were you when he was killed? On the road? In the garden?”

“In the garden, by the gate.”

Valentine started up when she learnt she had passed so close to her step-son on her way to Mademoiselle Seuret’s house to telephone the doctor.

“Are you feeling proud of yourself?”

“That’s my business.”

“You knew she possessed a revolver?”

“I knew she’d kept my father’s revolver. Tell me, Chief-Inspector, will you kindly inform me whether...”

“Not a thing! I’m the one who’s asking the questions.”

“And if I refused to answer?”

“That wouldn’t alter anything at all, except that I’d probably decide to slap you on the face, a thing I’ve been wanting to do for the last quarter of an hour.”

In spite of the tragic circumstances, in spite of the body still in the next room, Valentine could not help giving a little satisfied smile, almost gleeful.

“How long have you known?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Listen to me, Besson. I advise you not to be an idiot. How long have you known that your step-mother’s jewellery was never sold, and that they’re the originals she’s kept and not imitations, as people have been led to believe?”

It was her turn to be startled; she looked at Maigret in amazement, with involuntary admiration, shifting about in her chair as if she wanted to have her say, but he paid not the least attention to her.

“I always suspected it.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew her, and I knew my father.”

“You mean that she was scared of being poor and she wasn’t the sort of woman to neglect taking precautions?”

“Yes. And my father did everything she wished.”

“They were married at the time husband and wife shared all belongings equally?”

“Yes.”

“What do you estimate the value of the jewels to be?”

“Several million francs in present-day currency. There must be some we don’t know about, because my father used to be embarrassed about spending so much on her.”

“When he died and you were told the jewels had been sold a long time before, you didn’t say anything to your brother or to Arlette?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I wasn’t certain.”

“Wouldn’t it be more correct to say you hoped to come to some sort of arrangement with Valentine?”

Valentine did not miss one syllable spoken, not one of Maigret’s gestures, not one of Théo’s expressions. She was taking in everything, a lot more than Castaing, whose knowledge of shorthand was rudimentary.

“I refuse to answer that question.”

“It’s not worthy of you, is it? Did you speak to Valentine herself?”

“Not any more.”

“Because you knew that she was more cunning than you, and you were waiting to get hold of some proof. How did you obtain proof? How long did it take?”

“I made enquiries among friends of mine in the diamond business about some of the jewels which would have been noticed, and that’s how I learned they hadn’t been put on the

market, not in France at all events, and probably not in Europe.”

“You waited patiently for five years.”

“I had a little money left. I brought off a few business deals.”

“This year, as you were at your wits’ end to know what to do, you came and spent your holidays at Étretat. It wasn’t by accident that you got to know La Rose and set about encouraging her in her odd ways?”

Silence. Valentine was stretching out her neck like a bird, and it was the first time Maigret had seen the old woman’s neck bare; it was usually enclosed in a wide, black velvet ribbon, with a pearl on it.

“Now, think hard before answering. Did Rose already know when you met her, or did she only begin ferreting around the house at your instigation?”

“She was ferreting before she knew me.”

“Why?”

“Out of curiosity, and because she hated my step-mother.”

“Did she have any reason for hating her?”

“She thought she was proud and hard. Both of them lived in this house ready for battle, so to speak, and neither of them took the trouble to make a secret of it.”

“Did Rose think of the jewels?”

“No. She got hold of a gimlet to make a little hole in the wall separating the two rooms.”

Valentine shifted in her chair, indignant, and she looked as if she wanted to go upstairs at once to see if this outrageous thing were true.

“When was this?”

“About a fortnight ago, one afternoon when Valentine was having tea with Mademoiselle Seuret.”

“What did she see through the hole?”

“Nothing at first. She had to wait several days. One evening, after she had pretended to be asleep and snoring, she got out of bed quietly and saw Valentine open the cupboard opposite her bed.”

“Rose had never looked inside?”

“All the drawers and cupboards in the house are locked, and Valentine keeps the keys on her. Even if she wanted a tin of sardines Rose had to ask her.”

“In that case, how was she able to get hold of one of the rings?”

“While Valentine was having her bath. She’d said nothing about it to me beforehand. She must have prepared the whole thing very carefully, planned it in detail, so to speak.”

“Have you seen the ring?”

“Yes.”

“What did she intend to do with it?”

“Nothing. She would have given the whole thing away if she’d worn it. It was rather her idea of getting her own back.”

“You didn’t think your step-mother would notice?”

“Perhaps.”

“You just waited, didn’t you, to find out what her reaction would be?”

“Possibly.”

“You’d be happy to have your share, wouldn’t you, without saying any thing to Charles or Arlette?”

“I won’t answer that.”

“I expect you were convinced nobody could have anything on you?”

“I haven’t killed anyone.”

She fidgeted in her chair again, wanting to hold up her hand, as if she were at school, to ask permission to speak.

“That’s all I have to ask you.”

“May I go now?”

“You can stay here.”

“Am I free?”

“Not until further notice.”

Maigret began pacing up and down again, slightly red in the face, now that he was about to go for the old lady.

“You heard?”

“Everything he said is false.”

He took the ring from his waistcoat pocket and showed it to her.

“You deny that the real jewels are in your bedroom? Do you want me to take your keys and fetch them?”

“It was my right. My husband agreed with me. He considered his sons to be old enough to look after themselves, and he didn’t want to leave an old woman like me without any resources. If the children had known, they would have sold them, and a year later they would still have been just as badly off.”

He avoided looking at her.

“Why did you hate La Rose?”

“I didn’t hate her. I didn’t trust her, and events have proved me right. It was she who took a dislike to me, when I was doing all I could for her.”

“When did you find out the ring was missing?”

She opened her mouth, was about to reply, then her look hardened.

“I’m not going to answer any more of your questions.”

“Just as you please.”

He turned to Castaing.

“Go on taking notes, all the same.”

He paced heavily around the room, making the objects in it tremble, and soliloquized:

“It was probably last week, before Wednesday, that you made this discovery. La Rose was the only person who could have seen you and got hold of the ring. You doubtless went through all her belongings without finding a thing. When she went out on Wednesday, you followed her and saw her meet Théo at Étretat.

“You really began to get frightened.

“You didn’t know whether she had spoken to him about it. You suspected he was here on account of the jewels.”

In spite of her resolution not to say anything she couldn’t help bursting out:

“From the day he knew, my life would have been in danger.”

“That’s very possible. Note that I didn’t ask you anything. Interrupt me if you wish, but I don’t need any confirmation.

“You decided to get rid of La Rose before she had time to betray you—at least that’s what you hoped—and you took advantage of a unique opportunity which presented itself. The famous 3rd of September! The only day of the year when the whole family was together here, the family you hate, including your daughter.”

She opened her mouth once again, but he didn’t give her time to interrupt him.

“You were aware of your maid’s passion for medicine, for all sorts of medicine, whatever it was. You had doubtless caught her helping herself to some from your medicine chest. Every evening she probably had the habit of finishing off what you didn’t drink of your sleeping-draught.

“You see, this crime is a woman’s crime, even, I might say, the crime of an old woman living alone. It’s the sort of crime that’s been nursed for a long time, that’s been thought of lovingly for hours and hours, with always more flourishes being added.

“How would anybody suspect you, when the poison was apparently destined for you?

“Suspicion would inevitably fall on your daughter, or on the others.

“You only had to declare you found the draught bitter, and that you’d told your maid so. I’m sure you saw to everything.”

“She’d have drunk it in any case!”

She was not beaten, as one might have expected. She remained alert, not losing a word of what was being said, and she was probably preparing her answer in advance.

“You were convinced the investigations would be undertaken by the local police, who would be completely taken in. You only started getting frightened when you learned that Charles Besson was arranging for me to be sent from Paris.”

“You are a modest man, Monsieur Maigret.”

“I don’t know that I’m so modest, but you made the mistake of rushing up to the Quai des Orfèvres so as to take credit to yourself for having approached me.”

“And how was I to know, if you please, that Charles had thought of you?”

“That I don’t know. It’s a point which will be cleared up later on.”

“There’ll be a lot of points to be cleared up, seeing that you’ve no proof of the theories you’re putting forward so confidently.”

Maigret ignored the challenge.

“There are the jewels, for example. My keys are on the table in front of you. Go upstairs and have a look.”

He stopped walking, looked her in the eye, puzzled by this new problem, and seemed to speak his thoughts aloud.

“Perhaps you took advantage of your trip to Paris to deposit them somewhere? No! You wouldn’t have hidden them so far away. You haven’t deposited them in a bank, where they can be easily traced.”

She smiled at him, slyly.

“Go and search!”

“And I shall find.”

“If you don’t find them, nothing you’ve maintained will hold water.”

“We’ll return to this in due course.”

He was sorry now that he had broken the bottle of calvados, in a moment of anger, as he would have been glad of a drink.

“When I called in to see you earlier this evening, it was no accident that I mentioned the relationship between La Rose and Théo Besson, and their meeting on Wednesday. I knew it would lead to some reaction from you and that, for fear I might question Théo and he might talk, you would try to see him, perhaps shut him up for good. I was wondering how you’d manage to meet him without being seen. I forgot about the telephone. Or strictly speaking, I forgot about old Mademoiselle Seuret living so close, and that you often call on her.”

He turned abruptly to Théo.

“Do you know her?”

“I haven’t seen her for several years.”

“She’s a cripple?”

“She was already half-deaf and half-blind in those days.”

“In that case, we have every chance of finding the jewels in her house.”

“You’re just putting bits together to try and make a case,” she said furiously. “You talk and talk, telling yourself that sooner or later you’ll find the right answer. I suppose you think you’re being smart?”

“You telephoned to Théo from her house, and you probably had to ring several numbers, since you finally got on to him in a bar. You told him you wanted to talk to him and he believed you. But you had no intention of talking to him.

“You see, your two crimes are not just the crimes of someone living alone, but the crimes of an old woman.

“You are a clever woman, Valentine!”

She puffed herself up, in spite of everything, fully alive to the compliment.

“Your task was to keep Théo quiet, and at the same time avoid drawing suspicion onto yourself. There was one way, which would probably have worked, but you were loath to take it: that was to offer to go halves with him.

“Your sense of ownership was too strong for that. The thought of being parted from any of those famous jewels, which don’t even help keep you alive, which will never be of any use to you, was so monstrous that you preferred to kill for a second time.

“You asked Théo to come and see you at midnight without saying anything about it to anybody.

“That’s what she asked you, wasn’t it, Monsieur Besson?”

“Do you think it proper for me to reply to that question? A gentleman...”

“You rotter! Does a gentleman get a servant mixed up in his family affairs and encourage her to commit a theft just because it makes things easier? Does a gentleman send someone to be murdered in his place?

“At heart, Monsieur Besson, you were at once frightened and triumphant after the telephone call from Valentine. Triumphant because you had won the match, because her call showed that she was ready to come to terms. Frightened, because you knew what sort of person she was, because you knew she wasn’t going to buy your silence with a light heart.

“You suspected a trap. That midnight meeting here meant trouble.

“You went back to your hotel to think about it. You were in luck when poor Henri, half-drunk, rang you up.

“I’d just had a talk with him which must have set his brain working. He started drinking, and he was anxious to see you, I don’t know why exactly; perhaps he wasn’t too sure himself.

“So you sent him on as a scout, telling him to be there dead on midnight.

“As a result he was the one who fell into Valentine’s trap.

“I take off my hat to you, Madame. Rose’s murder was admirably conceived, but this was one of diabolical cunning.

“Right up to the trick about the switch which you played on me this evening and which gave you an excuse for having fired, in your excitement, without turning on the outside light.

“Only it’s Henri who’s been murdered. Both sister and brother in the same week!

“Do you know what I’d do if I weren’t a member of the police force?

“I’d leave you here, in the inspector’s charge, while I went to Yport to tell the whole story to our friend Trochu and his wife.

“I’d explain to them how, why, and for what sordid motives, they have lost two of their children, in the flower of their life, within a few days.

“I’d bring them back here, with the brothers and sisters of your victims, and their neighbours and friends.”

He could see Théo, turned pale, tightening his fingers convulsively on the arm of his chair. As for Valentine, she jumped up, as if demented.

“You haven’t the right to do that! Why don’t you stop waiting here and take us off to Le Havre? You are obliged to arrest us, to arrest me at any rate.”

“Are you admitting everything?”

“I’m not admitting anything; but you are accusing me, and you haven’t the right to leave me here.”

Who knows whether the Trochus had not already been alerted and were not hurrying on their way?

“We are in a civilized country, and everyone has the right to be tried.”

She was straining her ears for any sounds outside, almost threw herself against Maigret for protection when she heard the sound of a car, then footsteps in the garden.

She was obviously near to hysteria. Her face was no longer pretty and there was panic in her eyes, her finger-nails were cutting into the chief-inspector's wrists.

"You haven't got the right! You haven't..."

It was not the Trochus, who knew nothing yet, but the van which had been sent from Le Havre, and a carload of policemen and experts.

For half an hour, they took over the house. Henri's body was carried away on a stretcher, while a police photographer, as a matter of duty, took photographs of the scene, including one of the window-pane which had been shattered by the bullet.

"You can go and get dressed."

"What about me?" asked Théo Besson, deflated, not knowing what to do with himself.

"You? You'd better try and set things right with your conscience."

Another car stopped on the road, and Charles Besson hurried into the house.

"What's happened?"

"I expected you sooner," Maigret replied dryly.

As if not understanding the implications of that remark, the Deputy apologized:

"I had a puncture on the way."

"What made you come?"

"Your conversation on the telephone about the ring, a while ago."

"I know. You recognized it from the description."

"I realized that Théo was right."

“Because you knew that Théo suspected your step-mother of having kept the jewels? Did he tell you?”

The two brothers were looking at each other coldly.

“He didn’t tell me, but I realized it from his attitude when the things were shared out.”

“You’ve hurried along to get your share? Have you forgotten your mother-in-law’s funeral tomorrow morning?”

“Why are you speaking to me so harshly? I don’t know anything. Who is it they’ve just taken away in the van?”

“First, you tell me what you’ve come here for.”

“I don’t know. When you spoke to me about the ring, I realized there’d be some sort of trouble, that Théo would try to do something and that Valentine wouldn’t let him have it all his own way.”

“Right enough! Something has happened, in fact, but your elder brother took care to send someone else to be murdered in his place.”

“Who?”

“Henri Trochu.”

“Do the parents know?”

“Not yet, and I’m not sure that I won’t give you the job of telling them the news. After all, you are their Deputy.”

“After this scandal I probably shan’t be any more. And La Rose? Who is the...?”

“Haven’t you guessed?”

“When you spoke to me about the stone, I thought...”

“Of your step-mother! She’s the one. You can explain it all to your constituents.”

“But I’ve done nothing!”

For a long while, Castaing, who had given up taking notes, had been looking dumbfounded at Maigret, listening at the same time to the sounds from the floor above.

“Are you ready?” the chief-inspector called up the stairs.

And when she didn’t reply immediately, he saw a frightened look on the inspector’s face.

“Don’t worry! Those sort of women don’t commit suicide. She’ll defend herself right to the very end, with teeth and nails, and she’ll find some means of getting hold of the best lawyers. And she knows they don’t cut off old ladies’ heads any more.”

Even as he spoke, Valentine came down the stairs, looking as much like a little marchioness as the first time he had seen her, her hair immaculate, her enormous bright eyes, her black dress without a crease, and a big diamond at her throat: one of the “imitations”, of course.

“Are you going to handcuff me?”

“I’m beginning to think you’d be delighted to have them, since it would be more theatrical and make you look like a victim. Take her away, lad.”

“You’re not coming to Le Havre with us?”

“No.”

“You’re going back to Paris?”

“Tomorrow morning, when I’ve been to collect the jewels.”

“You’ll send in the report?”

“You can write it out yourself. You know as much about it as I do.”

Castaing was still not very sure what had happened.

“What about this one?”

He was pointing to Théo, who had just lit a cigarette, and was taking pains not to go near his brother.

“He hasn’t committed any crime which can be punished by law. He’s too much of a coward. You’ll be able to find him again when you need him.”

“May I leave Étretat?” Théo said with relief.

“Whenever you like.”

“Could you get somebody to come with me to the hotel, so I can pick up my things and my car?”

Like Valentine, he was scared stiff of the Trochus. Maigret called over one of the inspectors from Le Havre.

“Go along with this gentleman. I give you full permission to kick him in the pants as a good-bye present.”

Just as she was leaving La Bicoque, Valentine turned to Maigret and said to him, her lip curled up:

“You think you’re clever, but you still haven’t had the last word.”

When he looked at his watch, it was half-past three in the morning, and the fog-signal was still hooting into the night. He now had with him only an inspector from Le Havre, who was finishing sealing the doors, and Charles Besson, whose vast bulk made him uncertain where to place himself.

“I’m wondering why you were so unkind to me just now, when I haven’t done anything?”

It was true, and Maigret almost felt sorry.

“I swear I never imagined that Valentine...”

“Will you drive me?”

“Where to?”

“To Yport.”

“You really insist?”

“It would save me having to go and look for a taxi, which can’t be easy at this hour.”

He regretted it a little, because Charles in his nervousness steered so alarmingly. He stopped the car as far as possible from the little house, which was just a blur in the fog.

“Do I have to wait for you?”

“Yes, please.”

Besson, sheltered in the darkness of the car, heard the chief-inspector knock on the door, then his voice saying:

“It’s me, Maigret.”

Charles saw a light go on, the door open and shut again, and he bit off the end of a cigar.

Half an hour went by, during which time he was more than once tempted to drive away. Then the door opened again. Three people slowly came towards the car. Maigret opened the door, spoke in a low, soft voice:

“Drop me off at Étretat on the way and then drive them to Le Havre.”

From time to time, the mother, who was wearing the veils she had worn on the day of the funeral, stifled a sob in her handkerchief.

As for the father, he didn’t say a word. Maigret said nothing either.

When he got out at Étretat, in front of his hotel, he turned and looked into the interior of the car, opened his mouth, couldn’t find anything to say and slowly raised his hat.

He did not get undressed or go to bed. At seven o’clock he went to old Mademoiselle Seuret’s house by taxi, and the same taxi dropped him at the station in time for the eight o’clock train. Beside his own suitcase, he was carrying in his hand a small morocco leather bag, which had a protecting cover of the same fresh blue as Valentine’s eyes.

*Carmel on the Sea,
California
8 December 1950*

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[for a complete bibliography of all 103 episodes of *The Maigret Saga*, check out [Steve Trussel's amazing fan site](http://www.trussel.com/f_maig.htm) at http://www.trussel.com/f_maig.htm]

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